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FALL 1987
ANTHOLOGY #57
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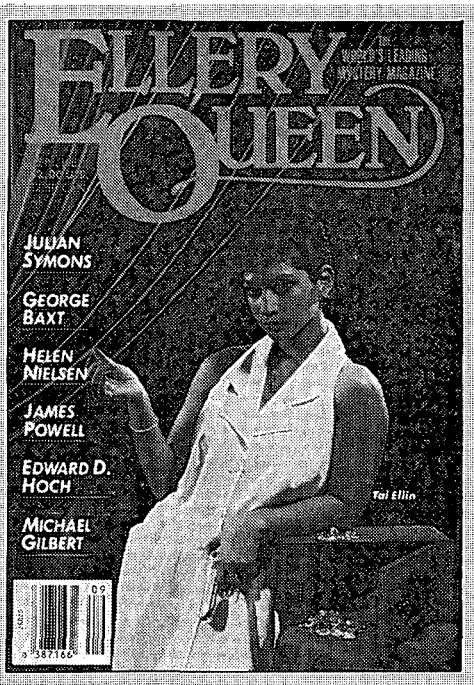

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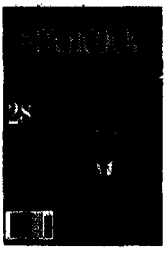

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FALL 1987
ANTHOLOGY #57

Edited by Eleanor Sullivan

Davis Publications, Inc.
380 Lexington Avenue
New York, New York 10017

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INTRODUCTION

Note, in this EQ collection, some similarities in story titles. William Bankier's "It's Hell, Little Brother" and Robert Barnard's "Sisters," for example. Are these stories about sibling rivalry? You'll find out. There's Jeffry Scott's "The Best Kind of Lie" and Ian Stuart's "The Gilded Truth." How similar are these stories? Your pleasure to discover. We *will* tell you that you'll find Brendan DuBois' "Money Is Something Else" has more in common, in a sense, with Ed Conrow's "Waikiki Green" than "Waikiki Green" has in common with Janwillem van de Wetering's dreamlike, highly unclassifiable "The Green-Haired Suspect."

But then so are Nedra Tyre's twin teddy-bear tales dreamlike and unclassifiable. Asked about their genesis, she told us more wonderful background than can be fitted here but most pertinently: "I wanted to use teddy bears, who are among the most appealing and universally loved toys, to show that death and evil can come from even the blandest, least harmful source."

We're pleased to include a larger number of stories than usual from writers outside the U.S.—T. O. Teas (Hungary's leading crime novelist, whose first appearance in the Western world, thanks to British author David Williams, this is), Australian Peter Corris, Brazilian Rubem Fonseca, and our usual proud showing from the U.K., not the least of which is the prize-winning "What Maisie Saw" (first runner-up in London's *Fiction Magazine*'s crime-story competition) by Narinder Dhami, whose first published fiction this is.

E.S.

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William Bankier

It's Hell, Little Brother

Earl Fletcher brought Scottie's package with him when he unlocked the launderette at six o'clock in the morning. He was wrong to have peeled back the tape and looked inside last night after Riley drove him down from the Hollywood Hills, but he had done it and now he knew his brother was dealing cocaine.

The interior of the launderette looked as if a crowd of mischievous kids had been turned loose in it. The doors of all the dryers were hanging open, detergent boxes and newspapers littered the floor, spilled water had dried in stains, and lint filters from the washing machines were lying all over the place. Never mind, it would take him about forty minutes to render the place clean and tidy, then the customers would start arriving to do it all again. Except Sarah, the shopping-cart lady, she would be here any minute. Earl could count on Sarah the way he could depend on cold rain in the autumn back home in upstate New York.

As he gathered the white-plastic filters to wash them at the sink near the back door, Earl decided Scottie deserved his support. Arriving in Los Angeles with nothing but a dream, how many aspiring actors could call on a brother already established as a screenwriter? Only one film so far but it was success of a kind. And if Scottie hadn't flung open every door in town, what could Earl expect? At least Scottie had introduced him to Riley Rich, so he could claim he had an agent. Maybe Riley would succeed with her list of unknown clients and they might all become famous one day. Everybody was hustling and dreaming and waiting tables. And somebody had to wash the washing machines.

The front door of the launderette opened and in came Sarah, trundling her supermarket shopping cart in front of her. The cart was loaded with plastic bags and other paraphernalia—all of Sarah's worldly goods. The woman herself was dressed in layers of clothing adding bulk to a body already massive in its proportions. Parking the cart in the bay window, she settled on the window seat and began to spread out her breakfast. She had crusty bread and something in a plastic container. Earl tried not to think about the restaurant bins the food had probably come from.

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"Another day, another dollar!" she called to him, the brick face splitting in a cheerful grin. She still had half her teeth.

"That's right." Earl had left Scottie's package on a bench beside the sink. Now he shifted it to a shelf inside the cupboard where he kept his cleaning materials.

"Putting on the kettle, Earl?"

"You want coffee, Sarah?"

"Yeah. You putting on the kettle?"

He boiled two cups of water. You couldn't say Sarah was harmless. A crowd seemed to wind her up and set her off, but one-on-one she was okay most of the time. "Here's your coffee, Sarah," he said.

"Thanks, Earl."

Only once had Earl observed Sarah in full flow. This was on Fairfax Street, a couple of blocks away from the launderette. He was coming out of Canter's, sated with matzo-ball soup and salami on rye. There she was, swaggering like a prison guard, keeping the pavement clear in a circle around her cart. Her monologue was about God and unemployment and cars parked too close together.

The neighborhood left her alone. Customers of the launderette had complained, but the owners, Israelis who also ran the deli next door and who rented Earl his room on the second floor of the same building, were content to live and let live.

"Another scorcher, Sarah," he said, escaping to the far end of the room.

"But nice on the riverbank," she said.

What riverbank in L. A.? She was around the bend and out of sight. But her remark put Earl in mind of his home town, where a willow tree shaded a deep pool in a quiet part of the river. He and his brother used to swim there naked. Scottie had boasted he would persuade a certain girl to join him and one day he did, while Earl watched from the tall grass, excited and ashamed.

Putting away the coffee things, Earl glanced nervously at the package of cocaine. It had to be worth a fortune on the street. He would never have looked inside had it not been for Scottie's telephone call last night, changing the agreed plan. The previous afternoon, up at the big house in the Hollywood Hills, the instructions had been plain and simple—Earl was to deliver the package after ten o'clock the next morning to an ad agency on Beverly Boulevard within walking distance of Earl's room on Fairfax.

"Why can't you deliver it?" Earl had asked.

"Do I ask much? Riley the glamorous agent waiting for you out-

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side—didn't I set you up with her? Now you do this for me. Deliver the package to a man named Spike Armbruster. Got it?"

So Earl had taken on the assignment. Then last night, just as the late news was coming on, the telephone rang and it was Scottie. "Change of plans, little brother." He had sounded breathless—not exactly in trouble, but excited. "You don't deliver to Armbruster. You sit tight at the launderette. A man in uniform will come in before seven in the morning. Give him the package."

"What's his name?"

"Relax. How many cops will you have in between six and seven? Give him the package, he'll pass you a bundle in return. You bring that to me."

Now it was nearly half past six and Earl was keeping one eye on the street. That was when the black sedan cruised past slowly and a man in a hat gave Earl and Sarah and the launderette a long, hard look. Earl went cold.

Sarah conducted her trolley to the back of the room. "Excuse me, dear." She was going to use the washroom. After that, her routine would take her out the back door and away across the parking lot to disrupt some other part of the neighborhood. Today Earl felt he could use her company. And protection.

He was at the window now, looking hard in both directions for any sign of a uniform. The sedan showed again, rolled past, and parked. Nothing happened at first. Then both front doors opened and two men climbed out. The man with the hat was tall. The driver was short with a lot of curly red hair. Both were conservatively dressed and every move they made was slow. Earl Fletcher had never seen two such scary people in his life.

Where was the guy in uniform? Obviously he was a crooked cop, but so what? He would have a gun. It was after six-thirty. Earl hurried to the back of the launderette and took the package from the cupboard. There was no doubt in his mind that these men were coming after it. They were on the pavement outside, looking both ways before coming in. Earl thought of locking the door, but it was too late for that.

Sarah was singing to herself in the washroom. "Be my love, for no one else can end this yearning—"

She had a nice voice. The overloaded trolley was at his side. Earl stuffed the package of cocaine into one of her plastic bags, between mysterious bundles of cloth and paper. The front door opened. He picked up his broom and began sweeping the floor.

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"Hi," he said. "We aren't officially open yet but you can use a machine if you want."

The man in the hat confronted Earl. "Give us the package."

"What package?"

"We got no time. Hand it over."

Sarah made a lot of noise coming out of the washroom. She was carrying a half roll of toilet paper, which she began to hide in one of the bags in her trolley. The apparent chaos of her possessions was familiar territory to the bag lady. "What's this?" she said, taking out the package of cocaine. "Who put this here?"

The hat brushed past Earl and approached the woman. "I'll take that."

Sarah put the new acquisition behind her back, fending off the stranger. For a moment, they struggled. Then Sarah's anger increased and she shoved the man away so hard he bounced off a wall.

"Quit fooling around," his red-haired companion called from the front, where he was casting nervous glances out the window.

The hat produced a gun. "Give it here," he commanded, poking the muzzle against Sarah's stomach.

She delivered a punch that struck the gangster's chest and hurt him. She gave him another. The package was out of his reach in her other hand. The punches kept coming. The crazy old woman knew no fear and she was strong.

The man at the front yelled, "Come on, Mario!"

Mario pulled the trigger. The noise was shocking. Sarah backed off and sat on the bench beside the sink, the package dangling from her fingertips. He grabbed it from her and fled the launderette with his partner. Earl heard the car start up and drive away, only then realizing that a license number would have been useful.

He ran to the telephone and dialed emergency, saying, "Hold on, Sarah, I'm getting an ambulance." With the call completed, he went back to see how she was doing. There wasn't much difference in her heavy-legged, vacant-eyed appearance, but there was a spreading pool of blood on the floor under the bench. "Come on," Earl muttered to the ambulance.

The back door opened and in walked a man in police uniform. "Let's have it," he said. "I left the motor running." Then he noticed Sarah and her condition. "What happened?"

"You're too late. Two guys came in. One of them shot her and took the package."

"Nice."

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"I can describe them, and I saw the car."

"Forget it."

Earl didn't want to understand what the officer had just said. "I called an ambulance. Use your radio, try and speed it up."

"You must be nuts. I'm gone. I was never here." He made for the back door.

"Wait—what about *her?*"

"What *about* her? *You* called the ambulance."

"I saw your name tag. Leyland. If you walk out on this, you're in big trouble."

The cop came back to show Earl his weathered, weary face with its veins and furtive eyes. "Son, I'm not even supposed to be in this part of town. If I get dragged into this investigation, it's your brother who's in trouble."

Riley Rich drove an old yellow Mustang with a concealed switch in the glove compartment that had to be turned on before the car could be started. She steered confidently with one hand on the wheel, the other extended over the space between the bucket seats to where her fingertips touched Earl's hair. Seated beside her, he couldn't help imagining the car with its front end off the pavement, being towed from the scene of a collision.

"It's the building on the left," he said.

She made a U-turn, apparently without looking, to glide easily into a parking spot in front of the ad-agency offices. "Do you want me to come in with you?" she asked.

"You better wait here. He won't talk if he sees somebody else. He probably won't even talk to me."

"Take your time." Riley was wearing a white yachting cap tipped well forward over a fall of smooth black hair parted in the middle. She snatched it off now and dropped it among several hats scattered on the back seat, selecting in exchange a pale-blue straw with a wide brim. Shading her sharp, pretty face, this was the stuff of siestas. "We should have called the cops," she said, closing her eyes.

"Scottie would get burned. I told you what Leyland said."

"I show your photo-comp to the casting people now and they'll lose it. If I could say this is the brother of the writer in the big cocaine bust, they'd be interested."

Earl had been silent so far about his brother's response when he telephoned the news of the shooting. Scott had moaned, "This is all I needed."

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"All Sarah needed, too. She took the bullet."

"Shut up about this, little brother. Say nothing to nobody," Scott had warned. "It's bigger than both of us."

Earl got out of the car and went inside the building. The jolt of excitement he experienced at the idea of getting ahead on his brother's misfortune made him feel uneasy. But he despised the idea of the bag lady getting shot and nobody doing anything about it.

The office was a ground floor setup in a two-story building. A knockout Hispanic girl with a lisp took his name and sent him down a corridor to an office with the name SPIKE ARMBRUSTER on a plastic strip screwed to the door. The door was half open, so he wandered in. One of the tallest men he had ever seen was staring out a window at a fountain throwing water on palms and shrubs and cactus in several shades of green. The man turned and Earl recognized the ruddy face under a mass of tight salmon curls.

"Hey, you're the guy from the Olympic Games. The volleyball team."

Armbruster shambled forward to shake hands, his other hand pressed against his left kidney like a man who suffers from back pain. "How are you, Earl? Glad you came over. What's this about Scottie?"

"I wanted you to tell me."

"I'm not with you."

"This is all new to me," Earl said. "I know it's coke. And I don't like being involved."

"Scottie said you'd be delivering today. Then he called last night and said not."

"He called me and told me to hold the stuff for somebody else. To be picked up from me this morning. But two other guys got there first—one of them shot an old woman who happened to be in the launderette."

Armbruster clapped his hands together and laughed. He pivoted away from Earl and went back to his position by the window. "Man, I don't think I want to know you."

"I get the feeling this is all going to go quiet. The old woman has no family, and, as far as I can tell, no friends. She can live or die, it'll get a paragraph in the paper."

"Let it go quiet."

"I can't."

"Who are you helping?"

Earl had no answer to that.

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"Your brother is the troublemaker!" Armbruster exploded. "What does he do with all the money? I've been paying above the going rate. Now he's asking for money in advance on the next shipment. I mean what?"

Earl said, "Remember the way you played right beside the net and the ball was relayed to you at just the right height? And you took off and spiked it? Slammed it down so hard you almost drove the defender through the floor."

Armbruster remembered it well. His stress retreated and he smiled.

"That," Earl said, "is what I feel like doing to the bastard who shot Sarah."

Driving east toward Vine Street, heading in the direction of the Hollywood Hills, Earl told Riley what he had learned. "It's money, of course. Everything comes down to money. Scottie was asking Armbruster to pay him cash up front. Maybe Armbruster couldn't. Or wouldn't. That may be why he cut him off and switched the delivery to Leyland."

"Who are the guys who came in shooting?"

"I don't know. But they weren't Bogart and Cagney."

As Riley powered her car up into the hills, Earl stared at the giant letters mounted against the rough backdrop of rock and scrub: H O L L Y W O O D. All his life, it seemed, he had been looking at pictures of this landmark. Working with the summer-stock company on Lake Cayuga, he had muffed his lines some nights, dried completely on others, kissed the leading lady on the nose, missed an entrance. But one time he had felt the magic in the middle of a scene where he had most of the lines, had heard the tingling silence from a packed house, sensed their attention riveted on his words. All those people had belonged to him.

Now here he was, in Hollywood, California. Close. And getting closer.

Riley was glancing sideways at him. She was now wearing her Aegean fisherman's cap, the peak encroaching on her broad forehead. "Your dreams are showing, darling," she said.

He made himself impervious. "They'll never open the door."

Eight months in town and this was only the second time Earl had made it to his brother's front door. Actually, it was Nadine Koblensky's door. Riley knew all about Nadine Koblensky. She had gone on about her for several blocks on the way up. The widow of a very

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successful land speculator, she was rich enough to finance a couple of film productions on her own. "Unfortunately," Riley had said, "the movies weren't good enough to make us forget how Koblensky made his money."

"Was he crooked?"

"He had some tough friends. You're aware of the two economies in this country? We declare income and pay our taxes to Washington. Not everybody does that. Some people support the state within the state."

"I know you're right but I hate to think of it."

"The dark economy prospers because it's more efficient. That's because the one you and I support has to pretend to be benevolent." Parking the car outside a rambling mansion situated against a steep slope, Riley pointed up. "Look at the inspiration your brother has when he works. He's within sight of the Hollywood sign."

The maid who answered the door was a country girl, but from another country. She owed her present position to a war that had uprooted her family and had, in a less obvious way, shattered the land that had taken her in.

"We've come to see Scott Fletcher," Earl announced.

"Who is it, Lee?" A woman was hurrying down the stairs.

"We should have telephoned first," Riley murmured.

Nadine Koblensky took over. She was dressed in white linen that emphasized her pale complexion and bleached-wheat hair. "You don't have to tell me you're Scottie's brother. Sorry I wasn't here when you came by the other day. I'm Nadine." She seemed to be more interested in Riley Rich than she was in Earl. "And who have we got here?"

"My agent," Earl said. "Riley Rich."

"You'll get work," the widow predicted. "Come in and have a drink. From what I've gathered, we all could use one." She led the way through elegant rooms and out of a broad doorway onto a flagstone patio under a timber roof. "The writer in residence is hiding in his little house." She indicated a concrete tennis court at the base of a sloping lawn. Beyond its far end was situated a small clapboard cabin with a curtained window. "We'll talk and then I'll flush him out."

Lee brought a tray of glasses and a bottle of white wine in a bucket of ice. The widow Koblensky poured. "This whole thing has got out of control," she said. "I was wrong to go along with Scottie. I didn't mind him trying to get out with a bit of money, but I wash my hands

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now there's been shooting. Try this. I took delivery of twenty cases from Naples last week."

Earl liked the wine. He liked the house and the way Tinseltown flaunted its name on the hillside. He even liked this woman who had given his brother a place to live and work, although she wasn't very gracious about it. "What's going on with Scott?" he asked her.

"Talk to him," she said. "I liked his screenplay. I backed the film on the basis of the writing. As for what ended up on the screen, I take no responsibility."

"I talked to Armbruster."

"Maybe you talk too much."

"He said something about money up front."

"Did he now."

"Then there's that cop who showed up at the launderette. Leyland. He's a sad one."

"You'd be sad if you were Leyland."

Riley turned the conversation to what was happening around the sound stages and on location. Riley was always working. Nadine dropped crumbs of information that might or might not be nourishing. She asked about the agent's client list and, given a few names, confessed to never having heard of any of them. But she believed they could all be famous one day because they were represented by Riley Rich.

Earl interrupted as he felt the wine taking hold. "Can we go down and see Scottie?"

"You may as well. I haven't heard the typewriter all afternoon."

"Do you need me for this?" Riley asked.

"Probably not." Earl got up and began moving sideways down the grassy slope.

"Such a promising talent," he heard Nadine saying complacently. "Then he began sniffing dope and it's as if he blew his brains out."

The cabin consisted of one tiny room. A desk and an armchair had been moved in but not all of the sports and gardening gear had been taken out. "I even have to go up to the house to use the john," Scottie complained.

Until yesterday Earl hadn't laid eyes on his brother in months. He looked thinner than before, in need of a haircut, the handsome outlines of the Fletcher face blurred by a ratty beard.

But the new Scott Fletcher was revealed mainly in his mood, which was euphoric, and in his eyes, which glittered with confi-

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dence—not based, as far as Earl could determine, on any sort of reality. From his makeshift seat on a drum of weed-killer, the younger brother said, "You've got us in trouble and we're sliding in deeper."

"Never." Scottie leaned back in the swivel chair, battered training shoes propped on the desk. "It's all coming together. One more night and one more day and this boy is away. But I can't stay here tonight."

"This woman may die. You should have seen the blood she lost. Are you listening? They may not be able to save her."

Scottie took two large spoons from his pocket. "Remember Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn? How it used to drive us up the wall the way Tom insisted on digging Jim out with spoons? I thought you'd like this touch."

"Cut it out."

"But not a word to the Silver Widow." Scott's wink was big enough to reach the third balcony. "She's been on my case like you wouldn't believe. It was paradise up here for nearly a year. Now it's all started to go bad."

"You and your cocaine."

"No, the stuff lets me work. I can do thirty-six hours at a stretch—no problem."

"But is it any good?"

"Brilliant." Scott sat up, placing one hand on his forehead, the other on the typewriter. "Pure creative energy flowing from here to here." The machine was coated with dust. "But Nadine wants a home run on every page. Sometimes I only hit singles."

Earl felt his frustration turning to anger. He remembered a time when Scott acquired his first car and drove the two of them across the border and up the highway to a town on the outskirts of Montreal. That day they had neither the nerve nor the money to go all the way into the metropolis, but Scott insisted on buying a case of Canadian beer and placing it on the back seat with only a coat tossed over it. On the way back, approaching Customs and Immigration, Earl thought his heart was going to beat a hole in his chest. But Scottie seemed to love bluffing it through and sang like a drunken sailor as he raced on home along safe, familiar roads.

"For I am a Pirate King,
Hurrah for the Pirate King!"

He took his brother through the entire first act of the high-school production of *Penzance,* in which they had both played parts, and pretty soon Earl was singing, too.

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Now Earl got up and opened the door, letting in some air. "I want this thing settled."

"So do I," said Scott. "My plane leaves tomorrow. All I need is a place to stay tonight because this haven is no longer safe. That's where you come in. Nobody knows where you live."

"The bastard who shot Sarah—I don't like the way he just walked out of there."

"I'm not sure I can help you with him." Scott rattled the spoons between his fingers, then hid them under his jacket in the waistband of his slacks. In the doorway, he took his brother by the shoulders and cocked his head in the direction of the Hollywood sign. "There's gold in them there hills," he said. "But right now we're getting out of here."

Nadine had taken Riley inside the house. The brothers found them looking at a video of an auditioning unknown actor.

"Stars of tomorrow," Riley said. She had drunk a lot more wine.

"Yes, but in what heaven?" Scott said. "We're off, Nadine dearest darling lover angel. I'm going to feed my little brother in some overpriced citadel of salmonella. Look for me by moonlight."

Before following Scott out of the room, Earl said, "Do me a favor, Riley? Telephone County Hospital and ask how Sarah is doing. I don't know her last name. Brought in this morning with a gunshot wound."

"You've got it."

"Will you be okay?"

"Better than okay. Take care of your*self*."

Scott was revving a Mercedes in front of the mansion. Earl got in and buckled the belt across his chest just in time before the car began a pitching descent of twisting roads down out of the Hills toward Sunset Boulevard.

When they were driving normally on level streets, Scott said, "I haven't done a lot for you, kid."

"I'm supposed to do for myself. Make a right on Fairfax. You set me up with Riley Rich."

"She'll be good for you."

"I guess."

"And Nadine will be good for her."

Earl showed his brother where to park behind the launderette. He led him up the stairs to his room. Inside the cramped accommodation, Scott began to laugh. "The brothers Fletcher come to Hollywood. Me

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in my cabin and you in this slum. Sorry, Earl. —Hey, I have to get up."

Earl turned away as his brother produced a plastic bag from one pocket, a folding mirror from the other, and began to spill cocaine onto the glass surface. "At least I have a bathroom," he said. He went next door and spent some time. When he came back, Scott had put away the paraphernalia and was looking confident again.

"Have you got a flashlight, Earl?" he asked.

"No, but they sell them down the street. What do you want a flashlight for?"

"To light my way to prosperity. Listen, I've been there, kid. I've sat in the cinema while the credits roll and your name goes past in big white letters. Screenplay by Scott Fletcher. And that's it. That's all there is. Well, you know something, Earl? It isn't enough." For the first time that day, Earl thought his brother was in touch with reality. "I'll tell you something else," the writer went on. "Most of the audience hated it."

"I thought it was terrific. I saw it twice." This was a lie. Earl had attended one screening of his brother's film and had sat in the dark, cringing with embarrassment. How had so many adult people worked so long and spent so much money to produce this lightweight nonsense?

"I can't do it any more," Scott said. "Neither can half the other writers in this town, but they haven't the guts to admit it. I'm getting out. I met this girl during the shooting. She played a small part. She was a student here. She's gone home."

"Home where?"

"The Philippines. Manila. Her family remained rich after Marcos got kicked out. Forty-eight hours from now," Scottie beamed, "I shall be under blue Pacific skies with my beautiful Murwani. And with nearly seventy grand in the bank. That's good money in Manila."

Earl began to see it. "You've been ripping off the underworld."

"Doing my humble best. Don't they deserve it? I was able to because the widow Koblensky has connections. Would you believe it? Her old man, before his arteries silted up with saturated fats, was hand in glove with the Mafia. They were partners in all those shopping centers he developed. Nadine was part of it and she maintains the business now."

"That cool lady?"

"She doesn't shoot people. She makes telephone calls. By the way, I think they tapped her phone."

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"The police?"

"No, the bad guys. They want to know what their partner is up to. I'm afraid I got the old girl in trouble. And she's beginning to resent it."

"Scottie, I don't want to hear this."

"Dealing was no big deal. I had a lot of connections in the community. Mostly obtained through Nadine, who backs films and throws parties. Spike Armbruster attends some of the parties. When people would ask for a kilo or two, old Scottie would deliver."

"What went wrong?"

"Timing. Did you ever consider how half the misery in life comes down as a result of bad timing? You say a word that breaks a heart. It isn't the word, it's when you say it. Spoken half an hour later, it might have got a laugh."

"Okay, that's wisdom."

"You make plans to inherit wealth without anybody dying. It should work. But Leyland arrives at the launderette ten minutes late."

"Scottie, what's going on?"

"I kept the money from the last shipment. I stalled on the payment. I was able to get away with it because I'm Nadine Koblensky's protege. All I needed to cut myself loose was payment in advance for the next delivery, the one you handled. Armbruster was having trouble getting it up. So Nadine telephoned Leyland because Leyland is a quick pay."

"Why would she do that?"

"Because she wants me gone as eagerly as I want to go. Our thing is finished. If I could write another script, she'd keep me around. But, Earl, you want a bit of truth?"

"Let's go and get a flashlight. The store will close."

"The truth is," Scottie said, producing a shy smile Earl had not seen in years, "I can't do it any more. Your big brother is a one-script wonder."

The sun went down behind the Pacific Palisades. The sprawling city turned on its lights and the streets flowed cars with windows open to catch the warm night air that fluttered the garments of the handsome people inside. Scott Fletcher, with a ten-dollar flashlight in a paper bag on the seat between himself and his brother, drove the winding roads once more up and around and up again, past

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mansions and palm trees and sudden surprising outcroppings of rock and sand.

"You said they tapped Nadine's telephone," Earl prompted.

"I can't think of any other explanation for those thugs showing up before Leyland. Nadine knew he could come up with the cash I needed. I'd told her one more payday and I was gone. That meant she'd have an empty cabin for the next promising screenwriter."

"Won't they come after you?"

"Maybe. But Murwani's family has guns. You don't become rich and stay rich in the Philippines with your bare hands. Anyway, I'm gone. Nadine's friends may decide to write me off as a business loss. Like Texas Oil when they drill in the wrong place."

"Who the hell is Leyland?"

"Nadine tells me he was some sort of hero thirty years ago. He walked into a gang skirmish, black kids against Hispanics with guns and knives. Leyland went in like a Mountie, left his gun outside. He talked the situation down. There was no fight. They figure a dozen of those kids are living today because of Leyland."

"That wasn't what I saw in his face this morning."

"Of course not. Did you ever try to hang onto yesterday?"

Riley's car was still parked in front of the Koblensky house. Scott took the flashlight out of the bag, stowed it in his jacket pocket, and led the way inside. The women were at the dining-room table, having put away a meal.

Riley said, "I telephoned the hospital. They say Sarah's condition is stable."

Earl experienced satisfaction for the first time in days. "That's great. Thanks."

Nadine said, "What are you two up to? You look organized. That worries me."

"With your permission, I intend to make my way onto the hillside above this house and there, below the second L, my brother and I will dig for buried treasure." Scottie produced the flashlight and shouldered it like a weapon. "Actually, we're going to do it even without your permission."

"I have to warn you," the widow said, "this plan of yours may be off. People have been calling."

"Leyland."

"For one. Somebody else more important. Now that this woman was shot, everything is changed. They won't let you go."

"They can't stop me."

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"If you go I'll have to make good the money."

"Ah, now we hear the truth. Did you catch that grinding noise, little brother? That was the rusty hinges on milady's purse."

"I'm warning you, Scott," Nadine said sharply as the men left the room, "the scene where you escape has been cut."

Riley added her advice. "Remember what I told you, Earl. Take care of your*self!*"

At nine-thirty, although the sun was down, there was still pale light in the sky. Earl followed his brother up the steep incline, catching at handholds of grass and weeds as loose soil crumbled and fell away behind them. The giant cut-out letters on their iron mountings loomed a hundred yards above.

"Below the second L," Scott repeated. "This is the place." He switched on the flashlight and swept it over rocky ground. They were on a narrow plateau, no bigger than a couple of billiard tables end to end. "Can you tell me, for all the money, what other famous place-name contains two L's? Do you have the answer? It's Hell, little brother. Pretend we're digging on the outskirts of Hell."

"I don't believe this kid stuff," Earl said, accepting a spoon but refusing to burrow as Scott was doing under a ledge of rock. "You could have kept the money in the cabin."

"Really? Nadine is a ferret. Whenever I left, she was nosing around. My papers were never the way I left them."

Earl turned to look at the city and was dazzled by the sight of it. Los Angeles filled the dark basin with lights as far as he could see. The shapes of houses seemed alien on the mountainside, as if only the land was alive, resting for the moment but soon to shift and turn and spill the fragile artifacts of man into the pit.

The thudding beat of a helicopter caught Earl's attention. It seemed to be coming closer. "Hear that?"

"What?" Scott was breathing hard, pulling away the dirt with his bare hands.

"The chopper."

"Police patrol. Routine around here."

There was movement around the Koblensky house a hundred yards below. Earl saw the porch light come on. He could make out Nadine and Riley and somebody else out there. It was Leyland. "Routine, hell," he said. "Something's happening, Scottie."

"I just got rich." Scott stood up holding a plastic bag. Even in semidarkness, it was easy to see the money inside.

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The helicopter was moving in. A searchlight was switched on and began sweeping the slope. The two men on the ground were caught and held. An amplified voice called, "Police. Stay where you are."

The elder brother began to scramble down the slope. Earl yelled, "Scottie, for God's sake!"

"I don't know your plans—I'm going to Manila!"

The din made by the chopper was deafening. Earl had his hands in the air. He didn't know what to do, so he did nothing. Scottie made it to the patio and was confronted by Leyland. They were obviously yelling at each other. Nadine took Riley's arm and ushered her inside. Then the older woman came back, taking up a position to one side of the arguing men.

Scottie was beside himself. He was shaking a finger in Leyland's face as the cop stood, apparently calm, his arms folded across his chest.

Then Nadine raised her arm and held it out straight in front of her. By the time Earl realized she was holding a gun it was too late. Her arm jerked up and down. No sound could be heard through the helicopter chaos. Scottie's head twisted sharply and he collapsed on the patio flagstones.

"Hey!" As Earl began scrambling down the incline, he saw Leyland take the gun from Nadine's hand and pocket it while she appeared to lecture him like an impatient teacher.

Earl could only glance at Scottie's body and away, but he would never forget what the bullet had done to his brother's head. The helicopter was drifting up and away—normal speech was possible. "Look what you did!"

"Scottie went too far. That woman in the hospital is babbling to reporters. We were making money, but your brother became greedy."

"You killed him."

"We aren't sure where the shot came from," Leyland said.

"You think you can cover this up? I'll have you put in jail!"

"No," the policeman said, "you're the one who's going inside. Delivering cocaine for your brother. Helping him with the money. It's illegal, son."

They kept him at the house for an hour, questioning him while the ambulance arrived and Scott's body was taken away. On the way out, press photographers were taking pictures and a remote video unit was there from one of the TV stations. Earl hid his face.

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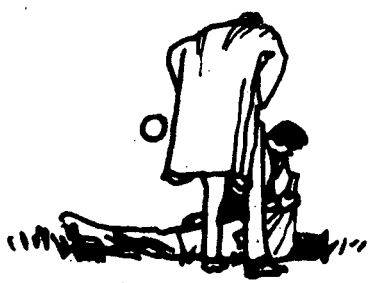
Then he noticed Riley Rich. She was in the Mustang with the door open, sitting sideways with her feet out on the ground.

"Earl," she called and he paid attention. "Behave yourself."

"Whose side are you on?"

"Yours and mine. You won't be inside for very long. When you come out, I'll have you working within a week." She knew she would have to tell this man every single move. "Now show the cameras your pretty face."



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Edward Wellen

Ten O'Clock

It looked like a workshop in hell. The infernal devices in various phases of assembly caught my eye first, before the body. The super, who of course was the last to know what went on in the loft, had phoned 911 and yelled, *"Bombs!"* before he yelled, *"Body!"* Homicide got there first, though we let the bomb squad, in protective padding and armor, bustle out gingerly with their loads of dynamite and plastique and blasting caps and fuses and timers before we went in to investigate the homicide.

While we waited, we drew the super around the bend of the corridor and interrogated him.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Escott," Escott said, then indicated me. "And this is my partner, Detective Grillo. Tell us how you came to find the body."

The super swelled up to his moment of glory while making himself small against possible catastrophe. "It was the shot. I seen action in the Service, and when I heard this noise I knew it wasn't no backfire. I was on the floor below, mopping the hallway, and it sounded like it had come from up here. I quick let myself into the incinerator room in case somebody with a gun come running down the stairs. Then, after a minute or so, when nothing happened, I decided it was safe to take a look. So I come up here and knocked on the door and got no answer. When I yelled Greebe's name and got no answer, I unlocked the door with my master key."

"Did you go inside?"

"Hell, no. One look was enough to tell me I didn't want to step inside. Besides, the chain was on the door. You know I'm telling you the truth because the bomb-squad guys had to cut the chain to get in. I did take time to pull the door to and lock it again before I run down to my phone."

Escott raised a hand to cut the super off and listen. "They're finishing."

He led us back around to the loft, asked the super for the master key off his ring, and told him he could get back to his mopping and we'd see him later.

The bomb-squad leader gave the place a final scan and came out

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with a go-ahead nod to the badges my partner and I had pinned on our civvies. "All yours. We didn't touch anything except the explosives and the triggering mechanisms."

Escott nodded our thanks, then raised an eyebrow at me. "Okay, Detective Grillo. Like the man says, it's all ours."

I drew a deep breath and followed Escott into the loft. The landlord had converted it into a studio apartment for artists. Its last tenant had converted it into an atelier for death.

Escott shoved his hands in his pockets and cast a side glance at me. I took the hint and followed suit. This was my first case since promotion from the uniformed ranks and I had just learned my first lesson on the job: Make sure you don't even unconsciously disturb the crime scene or add to or take away from what's there.

Enough traces of bomb-making remained on the workbench to fascinate me, but Escott strode past with only a glance at the tools, the frozen droplets of solder, and the dead-in-their-tracks snippets of wire insects. He made straight for the body.

The man lay on the floor by the one window. My attention was drawn to his hands, all his fingers but one grey with grime, that one a muddy red. A bullet had drilled straight through him, in at the chest and out at the back, but he had lived long enough to dip his finger in his blood and write on the dusty pane of the closed window: AT 10 OCLOCK.

His bookish appearance, his slackly mild features, had made me forget that he was a terrorist, a fanatic in some cause. The words reminded me. AT 10 OCLOCK.

I tried to maintain a professional dispassion, but I'm afraid my words came out in a rush. "Sergeant, could that mean a bomb's set to go off somewhere at ten o'clock?"

Escott's gaze at the message had the stretch of distance, as though he looked not so much at as through the writing. This carried over as he swung to face me, so that he seemed to stare not at me but through me. Then something shifted behind his eyes—a refocusing of the mind, perhaps—and he gave me a tight smile. "Good thinking, Grillo. You may be right, you may be wrong, but we can't afford to take chances, can we? Life and property have to take priority." He shot a glance at his wristwatch. "It's ten past five. Gives us nearly five hours to find any bomb or bombs."

He spoke with the professional dispassion I had aimed at, but a metropolis seemed a hopeless space to cover in five hours.

He put a hand on my shoulder and turned me toward the door.

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"You're younger and quicker. Ring headquarters—phone rather than radio, we don't want panic if media ears are eavesdropping on the police band. Inspector Van Tyl's the man you want to reach. He's the one to get things going."

When I got back to Escott, I saw four passports with the same photo of Greebe over different names lay weighted open on the workbench by the contents of Greebe's pockets: keys, thick wads of various currencies, some change including a few slugs, and an airline-ticket envelope.

Escott stood watching a guy from Forensics dust the place and another one photograph it while the Medical Examiner's people bagged the body and gurneyed it out. He waited until they all had finished and left, then he gave me a half smile. "This line of work makes you stop and think of last things. I'm not a believer, but I've done some reading about some beliefs along those lines. Eschatology, they call it—the study of last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell." He nodded toward the effects on the workbench. "First things first, though. A couple of those keys look like they're keys to coin-operated lockers. See if you can track down the lockers. If there are any bombs set to go off at ten o'clock, they just might be in those lockers." He withdrew one hand far enough for his wristwatch to show. "You have four hours and twenty minutes."

Back again, four hours later, I wiped my face and neck with an already damp handkerchief. More than the sultry weather and the long walk up got to me.

Escott eyed me. "How'd you make out?" He unpocketed a hand to stop me before I started. "No bombs, or I would've heard."

I shook my head no in agreement. "Inspector Van Tyl has all likely targets on full security alert and said he was going to evacuate the buildings most at risk."

Escott nodded. "And you?"

I tried to hide how proud I was of myself. "I located the two coin lockers. One held a carry-on bag with still another passport, the other held a suitcase full of leaflets telling why it's right to kill and maim for the cause. Both bags and their contents are in pretty bad shape because I had the bomb squad open them." I stared again at the bloody scrawl on the window pane: AT TEN OCLOCK. Twenty minutes to go. "You find any leads in the meanwhile?"

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Escott's eyes gave back only professional dispassion. "You mean to the killer?"

I tried to hold my voice level. "I mean to where Greebe might have planted his bombs. Like you said, Sergeant, first things first. The killer is obvious. The window was closed and the super had the master key. All we need is the motive and we can get that when we sweat him down at headquarters. What matters now is to deal with Greebe's time bombs before they go off at ten o'clock."

Escott nodded gravely. "I'm glad you agree with my sense of priorities. And we've dealt with the possibility. You checked the two spots they might be. I'm sure that covers it."

"How can you be sure? The message says ten o'clock—and there's still a quarter hour to go."

Escott nodded. "That's right, the message. On the closed window. At least, when we got here the window was closed. That doesn't mean it was closed all along. It's a hot, humid day. There's no air-conditioning. Greebe, or whatever the hell his real name was, felt safe in opening the window because there's nothing facing this way but the blank sealed windows of a storage warehouse. But somebody, probably a foreign intelligence-agent—one of ours would have called us in—rented a storage room in that warehouse and drilled a hole through the boarded-up window of the room, set up a rifle with a telescopic sight, and got our man here in the crosshairs. The first Greebe knew about it was when the shot drilled through him. Before his life leaked out, he managed to haul himself to the open window, pull it shut, and write on it in his own blood."

Escott narrowed his eyes. "By closing the window, the victim turned his murder into a locked-room case." Escott flushed. "The last thing in the world Greebe cared about was the lives of innocent people. All he cared about was his own precious life getting cut short—and he wanted his killer to pay."

I shook my head. "I don't get it. What does the message have to do with fingering the killer?"

Escott beckoned me to the window and pointed. "Look across at that building."

I took my first really good look at the building across the way. It filled everything to the sky. I looked for the window with the hole Escott said was drilled in it. "I don't spot it," I said. "There are too many windows."

"There," said Escott patiently. "At ten o'clock."

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Nedra Tyre

The Teddy Bear Crimes: One

Mary Lorimer looked across the floor of her spacious room to the long window that was only a short step across the sill to the balcony. Glancing through the window to the green hills beyond gave her infinite peace. Ned Lott, her psychiatrist, had admonished her against playing games. What a useless warning that was, for in this place of rest and renewal no one had any inclination to outmaneuver or outplay another. Though the afternoon was ending, the season was late spring and darkness would not arrive for several hours. There was time to spare for a long nap before dinner.

A noise waked her.

She was startled by a highly pitched yet faint voice from somewhere in the room and realized it was what had awakened her. But no one could be in the room except herself. People at Linden Gardens, as the rest home was called, seemed not to visit each other. During her seven weeks here no resident had ever entered her room. Everyone's standard communication on confrontations in the halls or library or lounge or dining room seemed to be a nod or a brief, tentative smile. There was nothing cold in the atmosphere. Quite the contrary—it was as if everyone accepted everyone else without having to engage in the ritual exchange of niceties.

"I would like to sing and dance for you."

The voice was mechanical, but where did it come from? Then she saw a perfectly ordinary teddy bear standing just inside the sill of the long window.

Though he had all the charming assets of teddy bears, he filled Mary with dismay. As a child she had adored teddies, though her encounters with them left her coughing and sneezing, and Dr. James had found she was allergic to their fur. She was forbidden to play with bears afterward, and that was a bitter deprivation.

Who could have left the teddy? The small balcony outside one of her bedroom windows was accessible from the central hall and someone could easily have set the bear inside her room, but who among the patients would have done such a thing? She hadn't noticed any

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air of whimsy or playfulness among them, and this was a whimsical act.

At dinner she took her usual table, but instead of facing the terrace so that most of the diners were behind her she sat so that she could look directly at them.

All the diners were intent upon their meal and no one met her scrutiny, however one among them must be glancing at her trying to detect her response to the teddy bear. More than once she embarrassed a diner by looking directly at him, only to note a quick shifting of his eyes as if she had discovered him in some obscene act. In spite of other awkward responses her glances occasionally evoked, she managed to look at everyone. No one appeared to be likely to put inside her window a teddy bear that would like to sing and dance. Though Mary tended to dawdle over food, especially the delicious meals served at Linden Gardens, she finished quickly and hurried back to her room.

On closing her door, she was assailed by an attack of sneezing and coughing. When it subsided, she looked at the bear at her window. How could so small and charming an object cause her such distress? Perhaps her memory of all her suffering as a child from the nearness of bears had brought on this exaggerated response. She recovered her normal breathing, but she must be wary. Protecting her nose with her hand, she said, "Sorry not to be hospitable, Teddy, but you're not welcome. I must ask you to leave at once." She patted the back of his head and set him outside on the balcony. Let whoever had left the bear take him away. She was not playing any games, not after Ned Lott's warning.

"But I don't play games," Mary had insisted at the time.

"You've spent your life playing games."

"Please tell me about these games. If I played games I don't remember enjoying them. Isn't that why games are played?"

"You enjoyed them. You played them to the hilt. I'll mention a few. The game of being your father's darling little girl and mommy's treasure. Most popular girl on campus. Most admired young matron and hostess. I could go on, but I'll end with the game of pretending life with you would cure Jack Lorimer of the alcoholism he'd cherished since he was fifteen. He was a desperately sick man needing treatment."

"I loved them. I loved my mother and father and husband."

"Under many circumstances love is not enough. Surely you knew

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how besotted your father was with you. So much so that he left home and married a girl even younger than you. Instead of coddling your mother in her grief, you should have encouraged her to be her own person. You should have helped her to become independent. She didn't have to take all those sleeping pills. As for Jack Lorimer, you're just lucky you weren't riding with him when he crashed."

Mary didn't answer him. Long before she had become his patient they had been friends—his family had lived in the next block. They stared at each other for half an hour without saying anything, and Ned Lott was at last the first to speak.

"I may not have helped you," he conceded, "but I'm sure I haven't hurt you. I think what you need is a rest. Have you heard of Linden Gardens? Nobody will bother you there. You can do as you please. The rooms are large and the views and walks are splendid. I can recommend it. I spent five weeks there a couple of years ago. If they have the same chef, the food is the best anywhere."

The bitter session ended like a chat with one friend exchanging resort suggestions with another.

Ned had been right, Linden Gardens was what she needed—nice, slow days of reading or walking in the flower garden or rambling in the woods—and though she knew she would leave eventually she was in no hurry. The only ripple on the quiet perfection was the odd appearance of the teddy bear, and who in her right mind could attribute malice to anything as appealing as a teddy bear?

Next morning on her way back to her room after breakfast, Mary stopped at a turning in the stairway to watch a bizarre procession on the floor above. She could not at first discern the sex of the person approaching, but when the person began to talk she undoubtedly spoke with a woman's voice. Her arms were filled with teddy bears and one was pinned to her lapel. She wore a backpack loaded with even more bears, and the tongue of a small red wagon filled with bears was hitched to the belt of her jacket. The woman's voice was warm but emphatic.

"Now, Joseph, we don't want any more chasing after squirrels. You behaved like some wild creature out of the woods instead of a nice teddy who has been taught correct behavior. You'll have to be punished. I'm sorry, but you know the rules. Louise, those green plums you ate will make you sick. You'll ruin everyone's pleasure today looking after you. Hurry now, everybody, it's time for morning chores and lessons. Wyatt, don't for a moment think I didn't see you

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hit Lewis. That means plain soda crackers instead of chocolate-chip cookies for your afternoon snack."

Mary mounted the rest of the stairway and watched the bear parade continue down the hall. The woman spilled the teddies that she was holding onto the hallway and let the backpack with its load of teddies fall onto the wagon. "Don't be playful, David, give me the key at once or you'll never again be entrusted with it." Then she unlocked the door. "Now don't rush or push or shove," she said and she tossed and gently kicked the bears inside the room.

Mary noticed that the bears lived at the extreme west of the hall. Her own room was at the extreme east. But her puzzle had been solved. That bear entourage was obviously the source of her teddy-bear caller, and she hoped she would not encounter any of the bears again.

She entered her room quickly, as if the bears might be chasing her, and a piece of paper fluttered up from the floor. A message was printed on the paper in pencil in very large letters.

YOU WERE VERY NAUGHTY TO PUT
NATHANIEL OUTSIDE THE WINDOW IT
RAINED HARD DURING THE NIGHT AND
HE CAUGHT PNEUMONIA HE MAY DIE

After lunch another note was shoved beneath Mary's door.

YOU HAVE MUCH TO ANSWER FOR

Mary was indignant. This message, and the other, were written by a psychotic and such a person belonged in a locked ward, not a rest home.

At dinner, Mary asked her waitress if it had rained the night before. "It sprinkled a little," she said, "but not enough to open an umbrella for."

After dessert, Mary lingered over brandy and was the last one to leave the dining room. She went directly to the night administrator's office. He seemed somewhat bored by the magazine he was reading and greeted her warmly as he pulled out a chair for her. She didn't hesitate to ask about the woman with the teddy bears.

"That's Miss Draper. She comes here for a month every spring while her family goes to France. Her brother-in-law is chairman of our board. He's very generous. Ordinarily she lives with her sister and brother-in-law and they'd like for her to go with them, but it would be too awkward for her to take the bears to France and she wouldn't think of leaving them. Let me tell you, she's a good mother to all those teddy bears."

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In spite of everything she could do to prevent it, Mary's left eyebrow rose.

"Most residents don't come in contact with her at all. She stays right with the bears, doesn't even have her meals in the dining room. She takes the bears out twice a day, and uses the service elevator and the back entrance. Do you know, once she came in here—I think it was year before last—and she said to me as if she were bestowing the nicest gift in the world, 'Would you like to hold Henry?' Or Bob or whatever the bear's name was. I took him and after a while I handed him back to her. I found it very pleasant."

He coughed and seemed to prod himself back to reality. "Obviously, Miss Draper's a bit"—his right forefinger made a small circle just above his ear—"and I doubt she'd be allowed to stay here if her brother-in-law hadn't financed the renovation of this entire estate. But I can assure you she won't interfere in any way with you or the other guests. Just enjoy her and her teddies if you happen to see them. I don't think she'll speak. I even doubt she'd notice you."

After lunch the next day, Mary returned to her room to find another pronouncement:

NATHANIEL WAS SHOWING SOME IMPROVEMENT BUT HE'S HAD A RELAPSE I THOUGHT YOU OUGHT TO KNOW

Mary would have to enter this game. She must make some statement, some defense, or she would be annoyed for the rest of her stay. What would appease Nathaniel? But there was no need for Mary to go quite that far. What would appease Miss Draper? A note? A get-well card? Maybe Miss Draper would prefer a formal apology on engraved paper.

Dear Nathaniel,

I am sorry that you have been so sick and have shown little improvement. It distresses me to learn that it was my fault you contracted pneumonia. If there is anything I can do to make your recovery easier I hope you will let me know.

Sincerely yours,
Mary Lorimer

Now to get the whole annoyance over. Mary set out on her journey

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down the long hall to the bears' room. She hoped they were on their afternoon outing and she would never again be involved in any way with them or their owner. She eased the note beneath the door—and was almost toppled when the door suddenly opened. Miss Draper confronted Mary without speaking and hurriedly read the note.

"Wait here. I'll see what Nathaniel says." She shut the door, put the chain on, and turned the bolt.

Within seconds, the chain fell, the bolt was turned, and Miss Draper stepped into the hall. "Nathaniel says yes there is something you can do to make him feel better—a party for him and his friends in your room at three."

"But it's one o'clock now."

"Nathaniel wants it at three." Miss Draper disappeared back inside the room. The door was slammed, the bolt was shot.

Mary realized that she would have to meet Nathaniel's ultimatum, but how could she prepare a party on such short notice? It was hopeless. Parties required flowers, but in that rural area no flower order could be delivered by three. There had to be refreshments. There was a small sweet shop where residents could buy tidbits between meals. The only sweets she found available there were petits fours. But how many petits fours did she need? How many bears were there, anyway? Nathaniel's convalescence party would have very spartan fare.

What should she wear? She wanted to be properly dressed for the bears, and she began searching through garment bags. Perhaps any one of the simple dinner dresses would be all right, but she must hurry. The excitement of the party had left her a mess. She had just begun to unbutton her blouse to change when there was a thunderous knock. Defensively, she glanced at her watch and saw that it was only two. It couldn't be her guests. —But it was her guests.

Teddy bears swarmed outside her door. She had never seen so many bears, and she began frantically to count them in alarm that there weren't enough petits fours for each of the bears to have one. She compelled herself to smile. "Do come in."

"We *are* in," Miss Draper answered.

"How nice to see you."

Miss Draper had disported the teddies around the large room in a flash.

"Well, what shall we do?" Mary was in disarray. "Shall we play games?"

"We'll play our own games, thank you very much. Positions, every-

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one." Miss Draper blew a whistle. She would have had to practice hours, Mary decided, to have developed such a technique so that, in fact, it appeared that the bears were actually engaged in scrimmage in a real football game. They charged down the field while tackles were made. Miss Draper hissed at Mary, "Take that man out—can't you see he's been injured? Send in a substitute, Roy's in pain—he needs resuscitation. Get down, give it to him." She pointed to some bears on the sideline. "Joanie and Lisa have to go to the bathroom. Take them there. Julie's hurt his paw. Get some dressing.

"Now then, no more football. It's time for leapfrog." Miss Draper blew her whistle. "Come on." And she managed in some unbelievable manner to make it appear that the bears really did play leapfrog. Miss Draper made the leaps, then pulled a teddy from behind her and manipulated his leap across her back, and other bears followed. "These bears need water. Quick, quick, water boy." She snapped her fingers at Mary. The teddies lay sprawled on their backs as if they were battlefield casualties. Even Miss Draper seemed winded.

Mary was desperate for air and breath. All that teddy-bear fur was suffocating her. She rushed to her dressing room, closed the door, and shoved the window open. Miss Draper knocked on the door. "Come out of there," she commanded. "What is the meaning of this? Hostesses shouldn't abandon their guests!"

Mary obeyed and rejoined them. "You must forgive me. I felt dizzy. Would you like some refreshments?" The bears sat in a ring and she tore at the box of petits fours, setting one before each bear. Long before she had completed the circle, she was convinced the supply would give out, but there were exactly enough. Miss Draper followed behind Mary jerking each little cake from its paper cup and placing it in a teddy bear's paw—then she made a reverse circuit and popped each sweet into her mouth.

The party must be over, Mary thought. The party had to be over. After refreshments, guests said goodbye and left. But the moments passed and no one moved.

Mary said, "It's been so nice to have you. Thank you for coming."

She stood up. It couldn't be true, but the bears seemed to have moved closer and to be glaring at her.

Miss Draper shook her head and smiled at the bears as if to apologize for their hostess's gaucherie. "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"I don't think so."

"The apology."

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"The what?"

"The public apology to Nathaniel for exposing him to pneumonia that nearly killed him."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about," Mary told her. "I'm really quite exhausted. I need to catch my breath."

"You know very well what I'm talking about. The public apology you owe Nathaniel."

Mary looked at the bears in the circle and their accumulated scent overpowered her. She had to breathe slowly. At first her voice choked and then it squeaked. "As you know, this party was in honor of Nathaniel. I'm sorry I set him on the balcony. I'd no idea that it would rain or that bears were subject to pneumonia. I do apologize."

Miss Draper's eyes became as inhuman as the button eyes of the bears.

The smell of the bears grew more pungent and Mary would suffocate unless she could reach the cool air of the balcony. Miss Draper blocked Mary's way, but nausea gave Mary the strength of despair and she forced past and leaned across the balcony rail. Air and the calming view of the green hills restored her.

Miss Draper stumbled across the window sill onto the balcony. Rage had colored her face beet-red.

"What is the meaning of this? What kind of party is this? Bears like party food just like everybody else. They like caviar and finger food and ice cream. They like champagne. They like flowers. They like roses and gardenias and lilies-of-the-valley. They like to take pony rides. Whoever heard of such a stingy hostess with such crude manners and wearing such sloppy clothes?

"You nearly killed Nathaniel and you didn't even know which bear he was. You made your apology with your back to him. Now, apologize to him properly!" She thrust the teddy bear into Mary's arms, and once again Mary's eyes filled with tears and her nose began to run. She pushed Nathaniel back into Miss Draper's hands. For a while it was very like a fast game of catch and the struggle activated the mechanism that made Nathaniel chant, "I would like to sing and dance for you." With an anger she had never felt before, Mary flung the bear across the railing.

"Go and get Nathaniel," Miss Draper ordered.

"He's your bear. Go and get him yourself."

The other bears were far away in her room, Nathaniel on the concrete patio three floors down. Once again Mary could breathe normally and think logically, without emotion. Everything would

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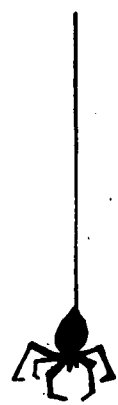
be resolved now. It was either Miss Draper or herself. They were evenly matched and they had gone too far to stop. Mary knew she could push Miss Draper across the rail to join Nathaniel. One of them was destined to be a victim and they were locked in a deadly embrace. For Miss Draper, Mary's death would be deserved. But for Mary, Miss Draper's death would be a willful act of murder and she could not bring herself to do it.

In that moment of hesitation, Mary sacrificed her advantage. For a second she fought with herself to change her mind, but the conviction returned that she could no longer function as a human being if she became a murderer. Almost with abandon she gave herself over to Miss Draper's strength. From far below she heard Nathaniel singing his monotonous song, and then she felt her body curve and arch across the balcony. For an instant Nathaniel's song became louder and then Mary heard nothing at all.



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Nedra Tyre

The Teddy Bear Crimes: Two

The steps at the exit door of the bus were too steep and Lucy Walters grabbed for the support rail as she stumbled to the sidewalk. She might have had a bad fall, and the distance to the supermarket was longer than she remembered, even though she shopped there weekly. She had brought her walking stick for security in negotiating the uneven pavement of the parking lot. Cars zipped in and out of spaces and she felt some triumph as she dodged the last one to enter the market. A little boy rushed past her and almost knocked her down as she tried to enter. His mother swept past to grab the boy's arm, but she made no apology for him or herself as Lucy struggled to regain her balance.

Instead, the woman scooped up her son and set him in the front of a shopping cart. Lucy selected a basket, knowing that if she took a cart she would buy more than she intended and would overburden herself in carrying it home. In spite of the people who pushed their way in front of her, or even grabbed the very apple she had her hand on, Lucy found the market magical. What miracles of hard work and planning it must take to get all those cans and boxes, packages and bottles onto the shelves and into the bins.

The shelf where the cream was was placed too high for her reach and she stood on tiptoe with her right arm extended, hoping that would be an imperative signal for help. However, no one volunteered and she sought out a young man selecting dogfood to ask for assistance.

When he handed the cream to her, she thanked him profusely and he said, "Nothing to it, grandma." His flipness annoyed her. Manners and grace seemed likely to disappear from the face of the earth as far as casual contacts were involved. Already there had been three lapses within a few minutes: the bus driver not coming to an easy stop, the woman and little boy oblivious to everything except themselves, and the young man calling her grandma. He could simply have said, "I was glad to do it."

Well, she'd better hurry to the checkout counter. Her impatience had made her loiter instead of getting on with her shopping and she

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would have to rush to the bus stop if she didn't want to risk having to take a later bus.

A man and wife raced her for the next place in the checkout line and won. Their cart was filled, and they paid with a check. There was a squabble about identification and the man flipped through various cards before he found his driver's license. Her own checkout was quick. Even so, she saw the bus starting off as she rushed toward the stop. The driver must have seen her—she was positive he had when she waved her walking stick. At least one of the passengers saw her and went to the driver and pointed toward Lucy. But the driver increased his speed and the wheels of the bus splashed dirty water on her as it passed.

"Damn," she said, taking off her glasses to wipe them. The buses were scheduled every half hour. She must try to occupy herself. Her usual trip was hurried and she seldom took the time to visit any of the other stores.

A short walk revealed nothing of interest. But across the street, a small shop looked inviting. Built like a cottage, the store had a sign in the left window that offered dolls, games, push toys, pull toys, and the city's largest collection of teddy bears. She crossed the street and her hand was on the door handle when a lock clicked and a large shade descended bearing the imprint *Sorry, We're Closed. Come Back Tomorrow. We Open at Ten O'Clock Sharp.*

Never mind, there was enough to see from outside. The windows were brilliantly lighted and filled with enchanting toys, and her eyes feasted on the array of dolls and stuffed animals. Strolling as she studied the windows, she came to a side entrance and saw that people were still in the shop. No doubt the shoppers who were inside at closing time were allowed to stay until they had completed their purchases.

The customers were as interesting to look at as the toys. A frantic young mother was struggling with a child who kept throwing stuffed toys off the shelves onto the floor and kicking them. There were several fierce encounters between children grabbing toys from each other.

Then Lucy looked toward the back of the shop, which was lighted by spotlights as if it were the setting for a play. The sole actor was a very large man who was embracing a huge white teddy bear. Lucy was fond of teddies herself and she was aware that as many adults as children doted on them. The man holding the white bear must

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love teddies, too, from the way he drew it close and hugged it. Yet she sensed something odd about the intimacy of the embrace—and the man seemed to feel Lucy's disapproval. He held the bear by one paw and looked directly at Lucy as if she were beneath contempt for staring.

His look embarrassed her and she turned her back on the shop just as her bus was making a loop around the block. There was plenty of time for her to get to the stop.

When the bus made a leisurely approach and stopped right in front of Lucy, the driver reached out to take her shopping bag so that she could mount the steps unencumbered.

"Thank you," she said, and he was careful to see that she was seated before he drove off. He was equally polite when she dismounted.

His kindness erased the earlier unpleasantness and she put away her groceries in good humor, then went to tidy herself before she ate supper.

Suddenly she dropped the washcloth, and the soap slid from the side of the basin onto the floor. "Good Lord," she said, "that man hugging the teddy bear was Jesse Beltran."

The realization stunned her. Sometimes in a crisis she had to give herself orders and this was such a time. "Lucy Walters," she said to herself in the medicine-chest mirror, "you are not going to let Jesse Beltran ruin your supper."

She picked up the soap and washcloth, and when she had finished washing her face and tidying her hair she went into the kitchen. Her supper would be modest yet palatable. She reheated some string beans she had cooked earlier in the week and split a muffin, topping each half with sharp cheddar cheese. While they were toasting, she set her place and moved a pot of geraniums from the kitchen window to the dining-room table. By then the cheese was melted and the beans were just right. After she had lighted a candle, she sat down to enjoy her supper. She liked making a small celebration of her evening meal.

Having completed another day of volunteer work at Charity Hospital, she was tired. It seemed to her that some of the patients were more demanding than usual that day and some of them were more listless. She must find ways to make them more comfortable.

She liked working with them. Well, "liked" was hardly the word: she felt committed.

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The food refreshed her, and she cleared away the dishes, then mixed a canned pear and peach in a large goblet and added a generous splash of sherry. When she had eaten the fruit, she drank the sherry and welcomed the little kick it gave her.

Coffee would be a perfect ending to her meal. Coffee usually kept her awake, but there was no need to worry about that tonight, she knew—thinking about Jesse Beltran would keep her awake until time to get up in the morning. So she made herself a large potful.

Jesse with a teddy bear.

What was he up to now?

Jesse was forever up to something. And the sight of him after so many years brought back her distress and sense of guilt. There must have been something she could have done to change him.

She had had success with many incorrigible students, though she was a fourth-grade teacher and in no sense a trained counselor or social worker. She had believed that children needed discipline and that they even welcomed it in the vast mysterious ways of the world in which they were beginners.

Well, she would like to see the person who could discipline Jesse. He terrified Louise Jaxson with the lewd drawings he handed her as his independent sketching assignment. He stopped up the toilets. He scared the little girls with what they called his dirty talk. He denied he had tried to burn down the school even when he was caught with turpentine dripping from his hands. It took one kindergarten boy a year to recover from a blow struck by Jesse.

Jesse's mother was in despair and his father was embarrassed and both swore that he didn't do such things at home. Of course, the father amended, Jesse *was* mischievous, like all boys.

In the end, Jesse had had to leave school. Lucy suggested that his parents get a private tutor or send him to military school. She even said that his misbehavior might stop, that it could be just a stage he was going through. But she knew that she was lying, and though in the relatively peaceful days and years of school without Jesse she felt relief, regret would return. There was something she could have done. Knowing the ways of Jesse as she did, surely she could have found the means to make him change.

His failure was her failure.

Her husband had his own frustrations at work and it wasn't fair to drag Jesse into their few leisure hours. The closest she ever came was when she got home late after an especially difficult session with

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Jesse to find Jim in the kitchen preparing dinner. "Jim," she asked, "what did we ever do to have such a remarkable son as Eric?"

"It's luck," he'd said, "and let's not question it."

After Jim and Eric died in a plane crash, Lucy had little concern for anyone or anything—until she eventually reprimanded herself for acting like the only woman ever bereft and forced herself to resume her pleasure in teaching and her delight in daily living. Yet even in the difficult time of giving way to grief, she had still nourished her uneasiness about Jesse. Whenever new telephone directories were issued, she checked for his name and address, noticing with disbelief how his address changed from one elegant residence to an even more prestigious one. He had become upwardly mobile in spite of her prediction that he was destined to be a mass murderer or a con man or even both.

Lucy's faith in her own conviction was reborn one afternoon when she read that Jesse's wife had died accidentally at Rever Lake, where they had gone for the weekend. They hadn't shopped on the way because Mrs. Beltran had been so eager for a swim. Others were in the crowded lake and Jesse hadn't hesitated to leave his wife, particularly since there were two lifeguards. On his return from buying groceries, he couldn't find her, and no one remembered having seen her. The lifeguards searched for her and an emergency crew of divers soon arrived, but nothing came of their efforts.

Lucy knew without doubt that Jesse had murdered his wife. What were they doing at such a cheap resort as Rever Lake when she was sure they were members of the country club, where acquaintances would have recognized Mrs. Beltran immediately and chatted with her, and if she were in distress they would have summoned lifeguards.

With a little guidance Lucy would prove Jesse's guilt.

She telephoned Lewis Moreland, her first cousin who was a brilliant lawyer. She didn't mention Jesse's name, only said that an incorrigible child with a criminal mind had grown into a man without principle and she knew in her heart that he had killed his wife. What should she do to bring a charge against him?

"Now just a minute, Lucy," he'd said. "The police in this town are capable and hardworking. Wives or husbands are the first ones they suspect in cases of this sort. Leave it to them. Don't go prying into something you know nothing about. Not only will you appear foolish and a meddler, you can be sued for making a false accusation. So

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just settle down, honey, and let me take you to dinner tonight. Mary Elizabeth has to go to a meeting and I hate to eat alone."

Two years later, the second Mrs. Beltran also met an accidental death. The night had been dark and rainy and her husband had no idea she was waiting just outside the garage to enter the car. He expected her to be at the front of the house in the protected area of the foyer as usual. He had struck her fatally as he backed out of the garage.

That time Lucy didn't call her cousin. She already knew what his inane advice would be. Instead she telephoned Janet Allen, her best friend in high school who now had her own law firm. Again, Lucy was discreet and mentioned no names. But her brilliant friend's answer was similar to that of her brilliant cousin: Don't meddle. The police will handle the case efficiently.

If Jesse murdered any more wives, it was never mentioned in the newspapers Lucy saw. Later she did read that Jesse Beltran and Associates had filed for bankruptcy. Some suits were brought against the firm and two members were tried, fined, and given sentences. Jesse wasn't even reprimanded.

Lucy entered old age without realizing it. She had become a retiree and a senior citizen, God help her, and she had no idea what to do with herself. Friends urged her to travel, but she was no traveler. She did take a few group tours, and every minute wished she were home. She hadn't ever been much of a reader and didn't want to learn any crafts or elementary French or to enroll in courses in schools of continuing education. Bridge was fun, but three hours of it on Saturday afternoon was enough. Time that had been so brief, so outrageously accelerated, now refused to pass.

Then, after she had volunteered as a nurse's aide at Charity Hospital, time resumed its gallop.

One night when Lucy got in from grocery shopping hungry and tired, she decided she wanted a potato for supper even though it would take a long time to bake. In the weeks since she had seen Jesse hugging the teddy, she had looked toward the toy shop and wondered about that strange scene and how Jesse had disposed of the bear. He might even have bought it for himself. She smiled at the thought of an impossible headline: CRIMINAL ATTRIBUTES HIS REFORM TO THE ENCOURAGEMENT AND LOVE OF TEDDY BEAR.

She wrapped a potato in foil, and after she had put it in the oven

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she pushed off her shoes, picked up the newspaper, and propped her feet on a kitchen stool. She began to read, following her usual habit of dwelling on the first section, skimming the business news, skipping the sports pages, and ending with the obituaries. Nearly always there was some familiar name, not necessarily that of a friend, but of an acquaintance or someone of national or local prominence. Except for the short piece about him, she would not have noticed the customary death notice as she knew no one named Shaw.

Two-year-old Billy Shaw loved his white teddy bear so much that he refused to go to sleep without it. They were about the same size.

While his parents went dancing last night, they left Billy in his cousin's care and returned at eleven to find Billy unconscious in his crib.

Billy's pediatrician was summoned and tried artificial respiration but there was no response. The city medical examiner was called. Tentative cause of death was listed as asphyxiation, and additional tests will be made.

Jesse Beltran, the cousin, said that he had checked on Billy just before the mother and father returned and he was perfectly all right.

A scorched smell reminded Lucy there was a potato in the oven and she went to rescue it. But her hunger had left her, and her habit of making a ceremony of supper was abandoned. Such a celebration would be gross after just reading of a small boy's murder.

But along with grief, a feeling of triumph had overtaken her. She had Jesse Beltran now, and she had waited far too long. Lewis Moreland and Janet Allen had stopped her from making accusations when Jesse had murdered his wives, but they were not going to stop her now. No one could stop her. She had seen Jesse in the act of buying the teddy bear to use as a murder weapon. She had been witness to his premeditated plans for murder.

Whatever came of her efforts, she had to let Jesse know that someone knew he had smothered little Billy. How should she begin? Would a stern letter be effective—an unsigned letter? No, she couldn't resort to threats or risk being charged with blackmail. She must act at once. She must telephone, though the early-evening hour was no time to try to reach anyone. Jesse might be working late, or even be with Billy's parents offering his sympathy, perhaps even welcoming guests into their apartment on the pretense he was sharing their grief.

When Lucy reached for the directory, her resolution almost gave way. She couldn't find Jesse's name. He probably had an unlisted

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number. But she looked again and saw that his name was exactly where it belonged. She was nervous, that's all. Her hands shook as she dialed the number.

He answered in an instant. "Yes?"

"Mr. Beltran?"

"Speaking."

"I'm a member of the Bear family."

"You're what?"

"I wanted to tell you how ashamed we all are that someone in the bear family murdered little Billy Shaw. We love children. We can't imagine a bear killing a little boy." She must hang up, but before her sweating hand could replace the receiver Jesse had ended the connection.

But Jesse Beltran wasn't going to get away with this murder. If she couldn't shame him into a confession she would go to the police. She would communicate with Jesse next by mail.

Notepaper with bears on it clogged the shelves of stationery shops. There were bears dressed as human beings, bears engaged in human activities, cute bears with colored fur and curled eyelashes, sexy bears whose slogans played on "bear" and "bare." What Lucy wanted was a bear looking out clearly at the beholder with a frank, alert attitude. At last she found him—a plain forthright bear on a small card without a printed message. She bought eight of the cards.

The message Lucy wrote matched the candid, sensible expression of the bear. "The Bear family is still in a state of shock over Billy." She addressed an envelope to Jesse, sealed the card inside, and mailed it. She planned to send the eight cards alternately to his office and his home at three-day intervals.

Yet with each mailing, she felt more and more remote from what she was trying to accomplish.

One morning, after a restless night, Lucy got up early. An unaddressed bear card was where she had left it on her desk the night before. She had decided it was useless to send it, but now thought perhaps she should go ahead. There was time to make up her mind over several cups of coffee before she left for the hospital. When she had finished the second coffee, she took the cup to the sink to wash it along with the other breakfast dishes, but that morning the dishes went unwashed.

Her stupidity astonished her.

Jesse had used a large white bear to suffocate Billy Shaw, and

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she had been sending him brown bears—all those earnest little brown bears. A large white teddy bear would be much more effective, maybe with a card enclosure saying, "All white bears have been banned from the Bear family."

She telephoned the hospital that an emergency had come up and she wouldn't be able to report for duty until later.

Lucy soon found that white teddy bears in toy shops were rare and quite expensive—and so appealing that even Jesse might welcome whatever white bear she selected. Early shoppers were few and the only child in the place was so quiet he could have passed as an inhibited Victorian boy until he suddenly howled with such anguish that a salesclerk dashed over to reassure him, putting on a little show with a hand puppet to appease him.

When the child and his mother left the store through the revolving door, the clerk tidied up the table where the boy had screamed and then went into the stockroom, leaving Lucy alone in the shop. Curious about what had upset the child, Lucy went to the table. At first she saw nothing that could have caused the uproar. Then she picked up a book and immediately let out a scream. A large white bear with sharp teeth and paws ready to pounce popped out at her. Her scream brought the same apologetic salesclerk running. "That crazy pop-up scares everybody," she said. "Our buyer insists it will be a big seller, but we haven't sold a single one—and we're not going to."

Lucy handed the startled clerk her credit card, then took the pop-up to Customer Service and had it wrapped for mailing. At the post office, she sent the package first-class to Jesse's office. She didn't have to wait long for a bus and she was only an hour and a half late to work.

Jesse's picture was in the final edition of the next afternoon's paper under the heading PROMINENT BUSINESSMAN DIES. He had arrived at work after a long breakfast conference and asked his secretary not to disturb him unless there was an emergency—he wanted to open his mail and return telephone calls. A few minutes later, his secretary heard a cry and a crash. She rushed in to find him on the floor, dead of a massive heart attack. He had no immediate survivors. His third wife had committed suicide in Malaysia last year while the couple was on a world cruise. Funeral arrangements would be announced.

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Murder had not been in Lucy's heart when she mailed the bear to Jesse. Her purpose had been to arouse his sense of guilt. She read the story several times and realized that Jesse had probably murdered his third wife, just as she was positive he had murdered the first two.

What puzzled her—and the more she thought about it, the more puzzled she became—was that there was no mention of the white pop-up bear.

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Jeffry Scott

The Best Kind of Lie

"I'd known his family well—maybe too well—but he had me at a disadvantage from the start. Because to get away with lying to a professional, you need a damned good memory. And this fellow hoped to catch me out over something that happened during World War Two.

The trouble with being my age is having to make do with a very skittish archive system up there between the ears. Recent events and the far past are all right—it's middle-distance stuff that presents problems.

For instance, I have a vivid recollection of the classroom door banging open and our headmaster rushing in, herding us toward the tall windows. "Quickly, boys, quickly! A *flying machine* is passing!" He had to lift me up to see. That must have been around 1916. Aircraft were relatively commonplace but ours was a remote rural area, where until that moment they had been matters of newspaper reports, hearsay, and taking it on trust. The same little boy, me, lived on to sit before a TV set watching man tread the moon. Within a single lifetime! Hard to credit, put that way.

Ask me which players scored in last night's soccer match on TV and I'll rattle off names and positions, but there's a whole era misted over—probably because I winced away from its sights even while they were going on.

I feel like a weary traveler nearing the end of his journey, and that's more than a figure of speech. One looks back on life as a landscape. Most of the towering landmarks of ambition, love, and fear, shadowing the path or luring one on, have sunk and dwindled into a great twilight plain.

Distance, no matter what the poet alleged, does *not* lend enchantment to the view. It just makes it easier to contemplate—another way of saying "I don't give a damn." In theory, that is. Inspector Cripps proved the theory to be false—his arrival scared the life out of me.

Young Cripps had me going from the start, because—idiotically—I took him for his own father. Same long face with its cheery but

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slightly put-upon expression. He and old Cyril Cripps, his dad, were like as two peas in the pod. It damn nigh stopped my heart because Cyril Cripps has been dead for years, hopped the twig not long after color TV started.

By the time we got *that* sorted out, precious Inspector Cripps had his backside in an armchair and seemed set for a long visit. I should have kept him on the doorstep—nothing like a keen nor'easter with a hint of sleet to encourage busybodies on their way. I still had him wrong, you see. At my time of life, living alone, it's open season for social workers.

They're reluctant to accept it's possible for me to lead a cleanly structured life in matching surroundings though everything takes twice as long as it should while being ten times more tiresome. They want to pack the likes of me off to some geriatric warehouse among *old* folk, for the sake of tidiness. But I can't help perceiving men and women a decade and more my junior as old—I've merely been on the planet for a longer time, not at all the same thing.

"Don't worry," Inspector Cripps assured me, the lying devil. "I'm not from Social Services, Mr. Harris. Different firm entirely, Police. Here's my warrant card."

He gave me that look they probably teach at police college. "CID, actually," he added meaningly—though what it was supposed to mean was beyond me.

Irritated, I tried pulling his leg. "Fair enough, I've been doing all those bank robberies. I kid the tellers that senility and rheumatoid arthritis are contagious, they better pay up or I'll breathe all over 'em. Works like a charm, but the getaway could be easier what with my walking frame."

His quiet answer might as well have been shouted. "Don't, Mr. Harris. This is serious. It's about a murder and that deserves better than silly jokes and putting on a front." Bad enough, but what really got me was staring at him only to see dear Minnie Cripps returning the look—the boy had his mother's eyes, the selfsame decent, faintly puzzled quality.

My next urgent message was that he wasn't really young Cripps, not by any manner of means. Easy to fall into that error, because I had seen Minnie so innocently proud of the ever-swelling bow window under her double chin, and then she and Cyril Cripps, oddly gentle and tentative for a beefy great beat-bobby, taking their baby to be christened. This man was older than his dad had been then. Cyril had soared to Police Constable after twenty years in the Force

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and his son was a plainclothes detective. Near retirement himself, from the lines in his face and the grey in his thinning, grizzled hair. Inspector isn't a bad rank. He had to be brighter and therefore more dangerous than his parents. And he was watching me like a hawk, blast him.

I said, "You'd better get out to the kitchen, make yourself useful. Not much milk in my tea, no sugar. Scald the pot out first, I like it strong."

He didn't stir. "I'm not leaving until we sort this, Mr. Harris. I mean to find out, you can make your book on that. How did you get my dad to do the dirty on everything he stood for? Why did he perjure himself all those years ago—cover up to save your neck?"

Fair to say for Inspector Cripps, he had a way with words.

When Cripps returned with the tea things on a tray, I was looking toward the group photograph above the fireplace. "Toward" because my sight isn't grand these days—but then I didn't need to see the picture in order to see faces, if you get my drift.

Wragley A.R.P.—the rescue party. Air Raid Precautions is what that A.R.P. stands for. At the start of World War Two, the label wasn't Civil Defense. Most communities had a rescue party to counter Hitler's bombing. You went in immediately after or sometimes during the air raids and saved victims from the rubble—or not, as the case might be. But we had our little victories.

Rescue parties are forgotten now and were never that famous. Wragley's may have been typical—a dozen of us, too old to fight but still fit, offering skills in our case by way of a couple of builders, a former fireman, a sailor with knowledge of shifting heavy, awkward weights out of confined spaces. Those of us who weren't skilled, like the farm worker and the picture-framer and the piano-tuner, learned on the job. For a year or two, old Goering and his Luftwaffe were all too ready to be taught.

As that Russian author says, near enough, all happy families' stories are the same. So are war stories—so I won't tell any. And I weep easier of late. They were grand lads, and after 1943 they never got any older.

Lord, though—the things we saw and did! Funny stuff as well as— No, no war stories. Then Portsmouth took a packet, days on end, and rescue parties were drafted in from the West country, Wragley among them. They never came back—a delayed-action bomb saw to that.

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By then I'd been shifted out of the rescue party. The national bosses got this inspired notion that toolmakers might be better deployed building bombers than swinging pick and shovel to clear up after them. So I missed Portsmouth by a matter of weeks and feel obscurely, illogically guilty about it to this day.

And to this day I sometimes turn around to dig Tommy Smith in the ribs, tell him about a joke on TV or an old flame I've seen with her grandchildren, and of course he's not there. Tommy was the party's leader, a bit of a villain, more than a bit, but I've seen him with his boilersuit on fire from the searing girder supported by his back while Don and Bert eased a woman out from under. After, Tommy tried to whistle "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" before he fainted from the pain. Hell of a bloke, crook or no.

Reverie and emotion fading, I found Inspector Cripps holding a steaming Souvenir from Brighton mug in both hands like a chalice, studying me. "My eyes keep watering," I said crossly. "I'm falling to bits—take no notice."

He jerked his chin at the group photo. "It's about that, in a way. The rescue party, Mr. Harris. What it is, they're building a supermarket out on the Steeple Oaks road. I daresay you can guess exactly where—that vacant site where Wragley Hall stood before it got bombed flat in the last war."

Of course the minute he'd said "murder" I'd known we were on our way to the Hall. It was razed in 1942, the winter, most likely in error. Either a certain bomber crew got the wind up at the sight of Bristol with abundant searchlights and antiaircraft guns waiting, dumped their load, and turned tail, or an engine failed or whatever so they had to lose weight in a hurry. Same result—Wragley Hall was blown to smithereens.

No loss, really. The Hall wasn't a great house, far less a stately home—just a bloody big, ugly building. Empty, too. The government had taken it over as dispersal offices for some Ministry—food-rationing department, as I recall.

But Wragley rescue party turned out just in case. Partly because that was the only attack in our area on the night in question, mainly because victims or survivors often turned up in so-called empty dwellings. It might be squatters or tramps or a serviceman dossing down after missing his train or a caretaker nipping in for one last check before the planes came—they would do it, in the early days. That time it was a wasted journey and we didn't try very hard because the bombs had transformed Wragley Hall from three floors

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of stubborn brick with limestone bits between into an extensive mound of wreckage.

We poked around for a while and listened for cries and so forth, but it was perishing cold and Bert Dinsley kept whining that everybody knew the Hall was untenanted. Hadn't the police patrolled it regularly, not to mention the new barbed-wire fence? Bert loved his comfort.

"All right, boys, pack it in!" Tommy Smith shouted. In the truck on the way home, he muttered to me—I generally drove with Tommy alongside and the others in the back—"Why would they guard an empty house? I wonder if they had a load of food coupons stored there, ready for the pen-pushers to shuffle when they moved in, eh? I might have a little nose around in a day or two, you never know."

"Don't you dare," I said. "It'd be looting, Tom."

"Salvage, more like. Know what food coupons cost on the black market, old son? Better than gold, those bits o' paper."

Inspector Cripps cleared his throat, dragging me back to the present. "Yes, they're building a supermarket there. Only, work stopped the other day, Mr. Harris. They began digging out the footings and found human remains."

"Ah," I said eloquently. "Well, we must have missed a victim that night. It was a hell of a mess, Mr. Cripps, and the place was supposed to be empty. I'm afraid it happened from time to time. I saw a program on telly last year about skeletons found in an air-raid shelter in London more than forty years after—"

"No," Inspector Cripps interrupted, and you'd swear he was regretful, "Wragley Hall was destroyed on the night of twenty January nineteen forty-two, no doubt about that. And by some miracle, wartime medical records were transferred to microfiche storage in the Wessex National Health Service area during the Nineteen Sixties, so we've been able to identify those human remains. They are of a man, an Army deserter, who was arrested but managed to escape again not far from here. Bristol. No doubt of the man, no doubt about the date of his escape—twenty-one January nineteen forty-two. In other words, the day after the bombing of Wragley Hall."

"Ah," I said. It seemed to be becoming my favorite remark.

"Belated condolences," he went on blandly. "The dead man was a close relative, Mr. Harris. A certain Arthur Clive Rankine. Ring a bell?"

"Brother-in-law," I agreed. "Close relative is pitching it a bit strong. My sister took up with a right parasite. I hated Artie Ran-

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kine's guts and he knew it." Always volunteer facts that'll come out anyway—it gives an impression of manly frankness, inbred honesty.

"You don't seem very surprised at the news that Mr. Rankine died in nineteen forty-two," Inspector Cripps remarked.

"Have a heart. I'm not surprised he's dead, which is a horse of a different color. Artie Rankine went on the trot from the Army after Dunkirk and none of us ever clapped eyes on him again. I assumed he'd snuffed it eventually, probably of booze or worse in some gutter."

Cripps was shaking his head and smiling. "Let me jog your memory, sir. It wasn't quite like that. Rankine skulked around Wragley, probably hidden by his wife—your only sister—for weeks at a time after deserting. He was good with women, they did what he wanted."

You don't know the half of it, I thought, keeping a poker face. Cripps was right. Artie had no male friends and plenty of enemies, but the ladies were another matter. My sister Carol, bless her, was besotted with him and she wasn't the only pebble on his grimy beach.

"So," Inspector Cripps continued, "plenty of people clapped eyes on Arthur Rankine up to the night of twenty-two January nineteen forty-two. Let's recap the chronology. Twenty January, Wragley Hall is bombed. Twenty-one January, Rankine is very much alive and kicking in Bristol. My bet is that he was murdered on twenty-two January sometime between eight and 9:15 P.M. Do you wonder how I picked that date and time?"

"You'll tell me."

"Now don't get sulky on me, guv'ner. On the night of twenty-two January, someone was caught trespassing at what had been Wragley Hall, messing about in the wreckage. My dad caught him, as a matter of fact, and it led to a magistrates' court case and a lot of scandal."

I walked into it. "That wasn't your pa's idea, young man. He'd have let me off with a caution, but that jumped-up Sergeant Bragg—"

Inspector Cripps beamed at me. "*I'm* telling the tale, please. You were found trespassing at the Hall site, and before my father—P.C. Cripps to be formal—could take action, Sergeant Bragg did indeed happen along and take charge. One of the nightmares about rescue-party personnel was that they might turn ghouls and grave-robbers, steal from the dead or wounded or the newly homeless they were supposed to protect. The authorities jumped on any suspicion of that. Therefore, Sergeant Bragg arrested you on a hatful of charges—carrying burglary tools, loitering with intent, being found

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on enclosed premises. Rather a joke considering the state of Wragley Hall, but that's what it was 'within the meaning of the Act' as lawyers put it. And you ended up in the dock, Mr. Harris."

"You've been doing your homework, Inspector. Pity you missed the part about me being found not guilty on all counts. I slipped behind the pile of rubble after dark to answer a call of nature—that was all. The famous burglary tools were a set of socket spanners I always had strapped to the carrier of my bike."

Cripps went into the head-shaking again. "Give over, Mr. Harris. You got a conditional discharge—a polite form of the magistrates saying they were ninety percent certain you were in the wrong but they'd let you off this time on account of good war work. Enough mud stuck for you to be slung out of the A.R.P. within a week. By murdering your brother-in-law, you saved yourself from the Portsmouth tragedy that wiped out the rest of the team—*and* you got away with the killing as well. Ironic."

Cripps, misunderstanding the stunned expression I could feel on my face, said: "Oh, it was murder right enough. The pathologist tells us crucial small bones in the throat were fractured. Arthur Rankine was throttled to death, probably by an extremely strong man. Which you were in your day."

Cautiously, almost experimentally, I ventured, "You mean to say I killed Artie all those years ago?" And to cover the implications of a question like that, I added angrily, "You must be in need of work! Haven't you got any modern crimes to worry about, or are they too hard?"

"Murder is murder." Cripps turned human suddenly. "That isn't it, Mr. Harris. You waylaid Arthur Rankine in the debris of Wragley Hall that night, or took his body there to hide it. My father caught you—and for the first and last time in his life went bad and condoned wrongdoing. Condoned? He turned himself into a bloody accomplice."

He heaved out of the armchair, full of nervous energy. "My father wasn't a ball of fire, Mr. Harris. I know that, but he should have made sergeant. He never did, because he queered his pitch in the Force, blotted his copybook, and flushed such career as he had straight down the toilet. Why?"

As if thinking aloud I said, "We were good mates, your dad and me. Minnie, too. Many's the supper I had with them when I snared a rabbit on the Common, while you were still in your cot."

"Dad had lots of friends," Inspector Cripps snapped. "He was that sort. But he never bent the rules an inch for them. He *lived* for law

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and order, Mr. Harris! I've got to know why he changed, just that once."

I tried again. "Maybe he never changed. All right, he got on his hind legs in court and blew Sergeant Bragg out of the water, told the magistrates he'd seen me ahead of him on the Steeple Oaks road, riding my pushbike same as him. A minute later he noticed a light in the rubble of the Hall, shouted, and I came out. I don't see why you're sure he was lying."

Cripps sank back in the chair. "Look—Arthur Rankine's corpse was in a sort of makeshift crypt at the Hall. Earth was scraped out between two fallen blocks of stone and a broken slab of marble was levered over the top once the body was in there. Half an hour's work, even for a strong man.

"All the paperwork from the Forties is still in the cellars at County HQ, Mr. Harris. I've sifted it. Sergeant Bragg arrested you at nine-fifteen that night and you spent until dawn at the Wragley police station before they bailed you. Bragg overstepped his authority, but coppers often do. He wanted to give you a lesson, whatever the magistrates decided.

"No sane person would have tried burying a corpse in the Hall during daylight—the rubble was less than knee-high in places and the road was heavily used and overlooks the site. Every night for a month from the time you were arrested, Sergeant Bragg had the site checked hourly. Then the Royal Artillery set up an antiaircraft battery—guarded, naturally—right next to the ruins of the Hall. They didn't move out again until late nineteen forty-four and by then they'd erected a Nissen hut right over the patch where Rankine's corpse was hidden. That hut didn't fall down until a few years back."

Noticing my attention wandering, Cripps said sharply, "Which means the body was virtually hidden there on the night of twenty-two January. That means my dad told the court a pack of lies about how long you were messing about in the rubble."

Before I could fumble some fresh lies into place, he said, "I was a nipper when the rows started. Generally Mum and Dad changed the subject if they caught me listening, but you know kids—little pitchers have big ears. The gist of it was, Mum thought Dad had spoiled himself for your sake and she couldn't make out why. Dishonesty didn't bother her so much as him leaving the Force with a lower pension when he could have been a sergeant, the years he put in. Dad just swore at her mostly, but you could tell he was in the

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wrong—guilty, hangdog. Once he shouted that she didn't know what she was on about—least said, soonest mended, and he'd done wrong to do right.

"He'd never discuss it with me, then or when I got older. But it's always nagged at me. And finding that murdered corpse has knocked me for six. Look here, Mr. Harris, you're too old for prison—no court would convict you. On my mother's life, my *daughter's,* this is off the record and stays behind your front door." Cripps touched his forehead shakily, produced his hanky, and wiped his face. "You killed Arthur Rankine, I know it as sure as the floor's under my feet and the ceiling's up there. *Why did Dad cover for you?"*

He was sincere. It wasn't an act to trap me into an admission, I could risk my life on that. Except that happiness—peace of mind, not an old man's freedom—was at stake here.

Thinking quickly, trying to madden him, I jeered, "It isn't much of a mystery, son. Your dad was all brawn and no brains. I conned him. He always was dead gullible."

It worked a treat. Inspector Cripps' hands bunched my cardigan before control reasserted itself and he apologized and stepped back.

"Sit down, this'll take time," I soothed. When he did, I said, "You never knew my wife Iris, she went in 'forty-six. No, tell a lie, it was 'forty-seven—that pig of a winter finished her.

"Iris wasn't a bad wife, but she was easily led and believed the best of everyone. Artie Rankine was *her* brother-in-law as well—see where we're going? Rankine did hide with Carol off and on, but the MPs kept sniffing round and home was the obvious place for them to check. He had ample excuses for leaving her, days at a time—weeks.

"I wanted to turn him in but my sister said she'd never speak to me again and Iris said it would kill Carol, she needed the whole family behind her. It never struck me that Iris was sticking up for him as much as for Carol.

"Anyway, there was never much time to ponder things—rescue-party duty at all hours, engineering jobs on the side. And I grew vegetables on a bit of ground by the railway line, eking out the food rations. I knocked up a shed there out of packing cases to save lugging the gardening tools back home every time.

"Artie Rankine hid out there in the warm weather and Iris sneaked him grub every day. I couldn't spare much time for the gardening. I always told her when I meant to go down there and she'd run ahead and warn him—the place was hardly ten minutes from our house. She swore it was no more than that—feeding and

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sheltering Rankine. Maybe so, I didn't push it. But when winter drew on and Rankine found himself a better place, he put the black on Iris, said he'd tell me and Carol they'd made love in that shed right through the summer. He got the best part of fifty quid out of her in the end, she closed her Post Office savings account.

"Then he went to Bristol, thieved with the docks gangs for a bit, nearly got caught, and ran home to Wragley—same old pattern. He came to Iris and said he had a chance to skip to Ireland, the Free State, but he needed a hundred quid and she'd better find it. She broke down and told me everything.

"That was the morning of twenty-two January. I'd just got back from the rescue-party base. We were sleeping by the truck at the time, same as firemen, for speed in turning out if there was a raid."

Inspector Cripps was listening patiently enough but it couldn't be spun out forever.

"I thought with Iris spilling the beans to me Artie Rankine was snookered—no more hold over her. He'd told her to go to the Pier Beach copse at three that afternoon to hand over the money. I went instead—and called him every dirty name under the sun.

"Much he cared. 'All right,' he says, 'I'd just as soon have the money direct from you. How d'you think your Carol will take it when I tell her me and your old lady have been making hay behind her back?' That's when it came to me, what an evil bastard he was and how it wasn't just Iris needed protecting but Carol as well.

"It came to me all of a piece. How I didn't have a hundred quid. How I needed to get him on his own, after dark. I remembered something Tommy Smith had said about Wragley Hall and maybe they'd been storing food coupons there—same as money, near enough. So I let on to be reluctant—said money was out but I knew of something better than a hundred quid he could share. Spun him a yarn about finding coupons in a cellar after the raid at the Hall and we could go there that night, it was my night off rescue-party duty."

Stirring, Inspector Cripps struck in, "It's got the ring of truth so far—but where does Dad come in? He'd never condone killing Rankine. If you'd told him what was going on, he would have arrested the bastard."

"Your father knew nothing about it. Think I was crazy, washing dirty linen in public, even with a good friend like him? And a copper, at that? No, I met Rankine at the Hall. I was waiting when he came. Wrung his dirty neck for him and good riddance. I'd already picked

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the place to bury him, but it took longer than I'd dreamed. That marble slab—I needed something heavy enough to put people off shifting it, but it was nearly too much for *me* to shift.

"Then your dad popped up, just as the slab moved. I'll never forget the grating noise and then his torch flashing—just a burst because of the blackout regulations. He asked what the hell was going on and—I said I'd just killed a man."

"Hold on," Cripps objected. "You told him flat out? And *my father* said jolly good show, more power to your elbow?"

"That's it," I confirmed meekly. "Because I gave him the best kind of lie—truth with a bit of top spin and a lot of what he wanted to hear. I said I'd killed a man, all right: a Hun, a German pilot—air crew, anyway."

The Inspector made to speak, changed his mind, and frowned at me to continue.

"You've no idea what it was like in nineteen forty-two because you know how the war turned out but we didn't. Our dander was up, but we were scared as well and made nasty with it. There was a lot of hate. There was a stink of it at that time in our locality, Mr. Cripps. A couple of nights before, a girls' boarding school had been bombed—twenty convent-school kids and I can't recall how many nuns blown to bits. And there was a tale running in the papers about Jerry prisoners-of-war getting more food than civilians. Think about that. Go hungry, work too hard, half expect to be conquered, and you don't love your enemy. God forgive me, but it's true—some of us hated Germans and Germany beyond reason."

Cripps' look indicated he understood only too easily, but for good measure I added, "Your father was one of us, son. There had been German planes about that night, you could hear them high up, and I sold him the tale that I'd been out on the moors and glimpsed a parachute drifting down, went looking, found a Hun airman half dead in a ditch, and after I'd finished he wasn't half dead any more.

"I told your dad I was burying the evidence. I took a hell of a gamble with that—held my wrists out for the cuffs and said, 'March me off to the nick and I'll take my medicine.'

"He sort of struggled with himself and then mumbled, 'I never heard that—must be going deaf.' Know what he did next? He helped me push that slab into place. Just before the sergeant in charge came by and wanted to know what was going on. If your father had been given time to weigh things up, he might have acted differently, but he wasn't. 'Nothing, Sarge,' he said, and from then on he was

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committed. It was just human error on his part, son. Emotion got the better of him. In his own way he was a very honorable man."

From miles away, Inspector Cripps murmured, "You called Rankine evil, but you're not much better. You manipulated my father, played on his chauvinism—patriotism—call it what you like."

Then he smiled sheepishly. "Poor old Dad. He never got over the war. As late as nineteen fifty-five my uncle brought a German car back after he'd been stationed in West Berlin and Dad practically expelled him from the family." He sighed. "At least I know. Dad condoned murder, but by his lights it was more a matter of rough justice. You won't hear any more about this, providing you keep your trap shut, Mr. Harris. I'm shielding my father, not you. You'll be dead soon, anyway. Time passes the sentence at your age."

Unkind, but he had a score to settle. His own silly fault, of course. He'd stirred the whole thing up again. Desperate to find out, it was Inspector Cripps' nature.

My nature is more for telling people what they *want* to hear, which tends to boil down to a pack of lies.

I had told Inspector Cripps that the best falsehood starts out as truth and stays within sight of it—bold on my part, since that was the treatment he happened to be getting at the time.

My wife Iris never could stand Artie Rankine. She was fiercely faithful to me and just as fiercely stingy—Artie stood no chance of blackmailing her. It was Minnie Cripps, the policeman's wife, who got taken in by Rankine, Minnie whom he blackmailed. The morning of the day Artie Rankine died Minnie couldn't take any more and confessed everything to Cyril.

Meanwhile, Rankine had turned up at my place. (What I'd said about being unable to turn him in for fear of driving my sister Carol away had been Bible truth.) There was no love lost between Rankine and me, but he came scrounging on the off-chance—and got a very dusty answer.

Iris was out at the time, but Tommy Smith had dropped in for a cup of tea. "If you had any sense," Tommy reckoned, "you'd get out to Wragley Hall tonight, Artie." And he shared his theory about clothing coupons waiting to be turned into hard cash.

Rankine took himself off and Tommy and me had a row. I nagged him to forget about the Hall and Tommy just looked slylike and said he knew what he was doing. But that night Tommy Smith wasn't at his digs when I called, nor in our usual pubs.

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I got it into my head that he'd had second thoughts, couldn't bear the idea of Rankine getting first shot at Wragley Hall, and nipped over there to share the spoils. Much later—weeks—I learned that Tommy had combed the debris of the Hall the very next night after the raid and found nothing. He'd sent Artie on a fool's errand, Tommy's idea of a joke. The reason I couldn't find Tommy on the night of the killing was that he'd been snuggled up to an ATS girl, like the sensible fellow he was.

Ignorant of that, sure that Tommy would be at Wragley Hall standing every chance of getting caught, I cycled out there to drag him away. What I found was P.C. Cyril Cripps, half out of his head with panic and remorse, hiding Rankine's body.

Cyril had started keeping an eye on the bombed site and was delighted to catch Army deserter Rankine. But then Artie turned fatally rash and nasty, demanding that P.C. Cripps turn him loose or be branded as a cuckold. Even in military prison, Rankine bragged, he would make sure Mr. and Mrs. Cripps were the laughingstock of Wragley.

Our Cyril lost his temper for the first and last time, and he hardly knew his own strength.

My confession to his son wasn't far from genuine, but the wrong way around. I covered for Cyril, *I* helped *him* shift that slab just before Sergeant Bragg pounced on the pair of us. None of it means much on the darkling plain of bygone days. But Inspector Cripps' view is different—the landmarks still tower above him, they matter.

The bad news: Inspector Cripps imagines that his father, swept away by wartime blood lust and primitive hatred, conspired to conceal a major crime. The good news: he hasn't the faintest notion that his father was a murderer, his mother no better than she might have been.

So what *does* matter? Very little to me, up here on my hill with night falling. But down on the plain, there are tiny sparks of light from the campfires of human kindness.

Today I lit another, I think. Not bad for a worn-out traveler.

"Q"

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Nancy C. Swoboda

Frozen Assets

He was considered the Norman Rockwell of Ashton, and Lydia had married Bradley Carter because she liked the idea of notoriety and the financial status he had achieved with his paintings. Wiry and small, with a shock of silver hair and bright-blue eyes, he had truly been attractive to her in the beginning. But in the ensuing years as his wife, Lydia had found that he was tight with his money, moody, and possessive. Although set in a lovely wooded acreage, the house they lived in was modest and Bradley expected her to be happy there, puttering around at wifely duties while he removed himself periodically to an isolated cabin up in the mountains to work on a newly inspired series of canvases.

It was at the Ashton Gallery, during a much-publicized one-man show of Bradley's latest work, that Lydia met Jud McCall, an art critic from the Coast. He took pity on her, isolated over in a corner while Bradley, surrounded by admirers, moved from here to there explaining each painting's motivation, and something clicked between them.

On the pretext of doing an article on Bradley, Jud stayed on in Ashton and he and Lydia began an affair. He was good-looking, exciting, and eager to live the good life. They shared much in common. When Jud facetiously made the comment that a dead artist's works usually commanded outlandish prices, they both knew without saying what was going to happen if they continued the affair.

It was during the last time Jud was at the house interviewing Bradley that Lydia became aware that her husband was suspicious. She and Jud had been careful in every respect, especially when the three of them were together, yet she knew he sensed a tie there, and that could prove dangerous—Bradley had a volatile temper.

"I'm tired of talking about myself," he had announced. "You've more than enough material, Jud. It's time to go to the cabin. Snow's been falling there in the last few days. Perfect for my next series."

Bradley left the following day, Tuesday. Wednesday morning, Lydia went marketing just to get out of the house. Everyone in town seemed to know the great Bradley Carter had gone up to his moun-

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tain. Both the grocer and the gas-station attendant remarked that her husband had been in to stock up.

Back at the house, Lydia stacked the ground round, prime rib, and packets of vegetables in the big chest freezer off the country kitchen. Jud should be calling soon. They had several precious days ahead together right here—if they dared.

In the back of her mind there was a little warning light, dim but persistent. No—the time had come to say it out loud. If she and Jud were to be together on a permanent basis, they must talk about how Bradley was to die.

"Drive in the garage, darling," she told Jud when he phoned. "We mustn't take any chances. See you at five for cocktails?"

"I'll be there. And Lydia? We have to talk."

"Yes. I know."

They sat in the kitchen at the table beside the fireplace and sipped their drinks in silence. Out the bay window in the dusk they could see the distant mountains, their peaks hazy in the snow-filled clouds.

Lydia spoke first. "Any ideas? It has to look accidental or we'll lose everything."

"I've been kicking around a couple of plans. Listen and see if one holds water—"

Lydia offered suggestions as he went on and then stopped abruptly. "Shh! Did you hear that?" she whispered.

"What? It's your nerves, darling. Maybe the wind at the shutters. Here, let me freshen your drink."

At that moment, from the shadowy hallway, stepped Bradley. He had a cassette recorder in one hand and a gun in the other. "So. I was right." His voice was low and trembling. "Well, my *dear* wife and admiring critic, this tape should give you all the security you'll need for quite a few years—but on the county, not me. The district attorney will be very interested in your plans." He moved toward the phone.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lydia saw Jud reaching slowly for a log stacked next to the hearth. She shifted in her chair just enough to upset her martini. "Oh!" She jumped up to wipe at her skirt, distracting Bradley.

Jud threw the log at Bradley's head and it hit solidly—he fell in a heap.

When they bent down to look, it was Jud who spoke first. "I think he's dead."

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Lydia gasped. "What do we do now?" She seemed dazed, but gingerly picked up the tape recorder. "You take his gun."

The front-door chimes froze them both in their tracks. "Who could that be?" Jud whispered.

"I don't know. I'll have to answer. You hide upstairs. Hurry!"

"What about Bradley?"

Frantically, Lydia's eyes darted around. "The freezer! Quick! There's room!"

They laid Bradley out on top of the meat and vegetables, then Jud went up the back stairs and Lydia answered the door. It was Sheriff Pickens.

"Sorry to bother you, Mrs. Carter, but is everything okay here? I know Bradley's up in the mountains and, well, I thought I saw somebody on the property."

Lydia's knees had all but dissolved, but she kept her voice steady. "How thoughtful, Sheriff. No, everything's just fine. Thanks for stopping. I always keep your number handy when Bradley's away."

"All right. Just make sure you're all locked up. Good night now."

The plan seemed to have made itself. Lydia and Jud waited until well after two in the morning for the freezer to do its work. Jud found Bradley's Wagoneer hidden in a grove of trees and backed it up to the kitchen door. They loaded the body into it and Lydia led the way up to the cabin in her car, about an hour's drive into the mountains.

It was bitter cold and snow skiffed across the ground. The scene was set: Bradley Carter slipped and hit his head when getting wood for a fire. In his unconscious state, he froze to death.

Lydia and Jud arrived back at her house before dawn. She made coffee while Jud started a fire. The first log that went in was the one he'd thrown at Bradley. Then he added the tape from the cassette containing their voices discussing the murder plans.

Lydia sat down at the table and sighed heavily. More to herself than to Jud she said, "I'm sure no one saw us. We wore gloves. We emptied the wood box at the cabin. The snow was still falling when we left, so our tracks are covered."

Jud looked at her pale face. "Stop it, Lydia. Everything went perfectly—even Sheriff Pickens stopping by to see you. Just start thinking what all those Bradley Carter originals stacked up in the storeroom will bring."

Lydia brightened a little. "Another series or two and he wanted

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to retire—buy a boat and sail the world. I couldn't have stood that, being cooped up with him night and day on a damned boat."

"That's better, my girl. Let's have that coffee and I'll be on my way."

"Take the back road. When you come back this afternoon make sure you're seen heading in this direction."

Jud returned to the house around three that afternoon and parked in the drive out front. Both he and Lydia, bathed and refreshed, felt able to carry out the final step with confidence.

Lydia picked up the phone and dialed.

"Well, I had to call you after all, Sheriff Pickens."

"Mrs. Carter. What can I do for you?"

"I'm worried about Bradley. I tried to call him this morning and then again just now when Jud McCall stopped by. He wants Bradley's approval on several things in the profile he's doing before he returns to the Coast, but there's still no answer. Frankly, I'm more than a little concerned."

"You were right to call me, Mrs. Carter. I'll get one of the boys and take a run up there. We'll be in touch."

It all went as they'd planned. Of course, Jud McCall remained to cover the story of the famous artist's tragic death. Judging from the extreme frigidity of the body, the coroner figured it must have happened sometime Tuesday. There seemed nothing irregular in view of the circumstances, and Bradley Carter's remains were transferred to Artie Harkness, the mortician, for the final ministrations.

Artie, a good deal younger than the coroner and anxious to have everything just right in view of his client's fame, was the one who noticed it and phoned Sheriff Pickens to come take a look.

It was odd, all right, but neither man knew what to make of it. Being thorough and plodding and also aware of the publicity surrounding Bradley Carter, Sheriff Pickens thought he'd darn well better run it down for the sake of justice—and his own badge, as well.

He took out his notebook and copied it down exactly as he saw it. Then, with all the hubbub of people coming to Ashton to pay their last respects to the renowned painter, the traffic problems diverted his attention for the rest of the day.

That night at home, he began puzzling it over to the extent that his wife Martha joined in. It was she who offered an opinion as to what it might mean.

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"I'd say that's what it is." Her eyes squinted thoughtfully. "I don't have one of theirs to compare it with, but I'm sure that's the way they do it."

Sheriff Pickens kissed his wife and headed for Mel's Grocery Emporium. There he found Martha was right on the money. Furthermore, Mel verified it with an exact match on the charge-account records.

The next stop was at headquarters, where the sheriff collected a deputy and the warrants. As he drove out to Bradley Carter's house, he went over it again and was sure he was right.

Lydia looked surprised to see him. Sheriff Pickens knew McCall was there, as well. His car was parked in the drive.

"Sorry, Mrs. Carter," he said brusquely and handed her the search warrant. "Something I have to check out regarding your husband's death."

She stepped back and shot a frightened glance at Jud, who was sitting on the living-room couch with a drink in his hand. Before he could react, Sheriff Pickens made a beeline for the kitchen, all the while hoping they hadn't had a celebratory dinner yet.

He located the freezer chest, opened it, and peered inside. A grin spread across his ruddy face. He picked up the prime rib roast and plunked it on the kitchen table.

The deputy brought the protesting couple out to join Pickens.

"You're both under arrest for the murder of Bradley Carter," he announced.

Neither Jud nor Lydia had anything to say but looked puzzled and apprehensive.

"I'll go through it for you." The sheriff motioned them to sit down. "Almost everyone in town knew that Bradley left for the mountains on Tuesday. You bought this roast on Wednesday and put it in the freezer. Your charge at Mel's is the only prime rib roast sold that day. Expensive, aren't they? Anyway, whatever Bradley's reasons for coming back here, he caught you two in some hanky-panky. I must have seen him when I decided to turn around and check on you that night. You'd already clubbed him on the head and had to stash him in the freezer when I showed up.

"Well, his warm hand came to rest against the red-ink numbers the meat scale kicks out on the pricing labels. Artie Harkness found those red numbers on the soft side of his palm below the little finger. The date was for Wednesday, one day *after* Bradley had left Ashton.

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"The freezer turned out to be a help as well as a hiding place, didn't it? Taking the body back up to the cabin where the temperature *could* prove fatal was very clever. Too bad you didn't notice the stamp on his hand. That ink is real indelible—Martha's always getting it on her fingers and the towels. —Well, the main thing now is to read you your rights. Have to bring this roast along with us when we go, too."

The *Ashton Chronicle* had a banner headline the next morning:
SHERIFF PICKENS SOLVES PRIME CRIME.

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N. Lambert

The Perfect Murder

Me and my mum lived on the sixteenth floor. I never had no Dad. She made me wear the keys on a chain round my neck so as I wouldn't get locked out. A yale and a mortice. There was always a lot of break-ins round our way, see, and my mum worked nights. As a hotel receptionist, she said. I didn't mind.

One morning I got up and there was this man in my mum's bed. She said his name was Trev. He said, "Hi, son," and put up his mitts like to box. He punched me a bit and laughed till Mum told him to leave it out.

Trev was never there when I went to sleep, only when I woke up. I asked Mum if he worked at the hotel, too, and she said sort of. I didn't bring her her cup of tea in bed no more after that.

Then one day I wake up really early like, because I can hear Mum screaming and crying, and when I go into her room Trev's sitting on top of her and hitting her round the face and there's blood on the sheet. I run out of the flat and knock up Mrs. P. next door. She says bloody hell and rings the police, but when they get there they don't do nothing because Mum tells them everything's all right. Trev makes like he's going to sort me out after they've gone, so I clear off round to my mate Gary's.

Mum's different when Trev's there. She starts giving me a few quid weekends to go to the pictures or down the arcade to get my dinner at McDonald's. One time I brought in chicken and chips, but I was too early and they were still in and Trev took them off me and chucked the bones at me and called me a little poof, so I went and sat on the toilet till they'd gone.

I never heard Mum scream again. Even when she had a black eye or a split lip, she'd always say she'd tripped running for the bus or walked into a door or something.

Then the social workers came and got me from school and told me my mum had had an accident at work and was in the hospital. I wanted to go and see her, but they wouldn't let me because she was very tired and needed a rest—so they paid for me to go away on holiday to my nan's in Ireland and I was there for a long time till my mum felt better.

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When I got back, Mum took the chain from round my neck and gave me two shiny new keys. Gary heard his dad saying Trev had been nicked, but when I asked Mum about it she just said he'd gone away and wouldn't be coming round no more.

We had a smashing Christmas, my mum and me. It was just like before. We made long streamers out of toilet paper, pink and blue and yellow ones, and hung them all over the flat. Mum made a crib at the bottom of the tree out of tissue paper and cardboard, and I made plasticine shepherds and donkeys and things. I cut paper stars and hung them from the tree, and then we wrapped up empty packets from the kitchen so it looked like there were lots and lots of presents and we put them all round the bottom of the tree beside the crib—piles and piles of them.

Then the day after Boxing Day, just before Mum left to go to work, the telly packed up and she said I could go and watch the big film round Gary's place as long as I was back home in bed by midnight.

I got in about half eleven and there was a funny smell in the flat, like you get outside of pubs.

It was him. He had a bottle in his hand and he said, "Hello, nancy-boy, where's your mum?"

I asked how he got in and he laughed and said he could pick any lock faster than I could pick my effing nose, sonny.

I tried to run out to Mrs. P.'s to phone the police but he got hold of me and shook me hard and said if I wanted to live long I could go to bed and stay there.

"Good behavior, lad," he said to me. "Good behavior. That's why I'm here, see? She made a bad mistake, your ma, grassing on me. She's a stupid cow. —What is she?"

He slapped me around a bit.

"A stupid cow," I said.

"But you're a bright kid and when the old lady gets home you're going to stay right there in your room and keep your bloody trap shut. What are you going to do, kid?"

"Stay in my room and keep my trap shut."

So I went to my room and sat on the bed, but it was very quiet what with no telly, and after a bit I could hear him snoring. When I looked through the chink in the door, he was flat out on the couch and the bottle was lying empty on the floor.

I ran out of the flat to tell Mrs. P., but then I stopped and went indoors again. Even if me and Mum got away and hid somewhere, he'd only find us and—

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I fetched the matches and knelt down by the tree and set fire to it.

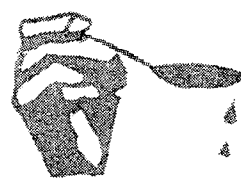
Then I shut the door and took the key from round my neck and turned the mortice and ran.

I wanted him to burn to death, but he didn't. I saw him jump, though. He was on fire. I never got to see the mess—I couldn't get near enough.

They knew I done it. Mum always said not to tell lies, and the lady policeman was very nice, so I told her.

It was all okay, though.

I mean, I wasn't quite ten yet, see?



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D. R. Bensen

The Bottom Line

It would get going faster if I did a storekeeper opening, like "What can I do for you?" but I don't do that. If I were moving a line of goods, I probably would, but I'm selling a service, which means myself, and I've found it works best to let the client get at it on his own. That way he's selling his problem to me first, and when he's done that, he's most of the way toward deciding I'm what he needs to handle it.

So when she came in at two, as we'd agreed when she phoned for an appointment, all I said was "Good afternoon."

She looked around the office and at me. Neither seemed to impress her much. Sure enough, she didn't get down to it right away. "You don't look like what I expected," she said.

"Most people don't," I said. That's true, as you'll see if you think about it a little. You meet somebody you've heard about or talked to on the phone, and nine times out of ten you're surprised—they're taller, blonder, fatter, or whatever than you had figured they would be.

"You look like an accountant," she said.

"No, I don't," I said. "I know a couple of accountants, and one of them looks and dresses like Jackie Gleason and one of them looks like one of those fellows called Brad on soap operas. What I look like is somebody who plays an accountant in movies or on TV. The kind of fellow you don't notice, which is what you want in my line of work, because if you want to follow someone for a while it's best to be the kind of person he isn't going to notice. If I looked like a detective, whatever that means, he would notice that there was someone who looked like a detective everywhere he went, which isn't good for the work."

What she looked like was one of those sharp-edged, sexy, fortyish ladies on the soaps who's married to a Brad, and what's making her sharp-edged is his playing around with some Valerie or Susan, and she is moneyed enough to do something about it that costs a little, like hiring me.

Going by my previous women clients, the odds were a hair under eighty-one percent that she wanted someone followed, so what I'd

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said could invite her to tell me about it. (If I were wrong and she wanted something else, the odds on the next woman client looking for a tail job would drop to a tick over eighty percent. People who are good at figures can work out from that how many women clients I've had and how many wanted someone tailed.)

The odds held (eighty-one percent and a touch for the next one, now)—it was a husband tail she wanted. "He's been out two or so nights almost every week for a month," she said. "Not all night, but till past ten. He says he's working—or some family thing came up."

"And you doubt that?"

She shrugged. "Who wouldn't?"

Not the ones like her, with that pinch of anger and greed around the eyes and mouth. It reinforced the sexy soap-lady look, and those ladies doubted everyone, especially the Brads. A client gave me one of those little pocket TV sets, on top of his fee—I found out which of his staff was pocketing them wholesale—and I keep it in the desk and check out the soaps on afternoons when there's no work and I don't want to do the accounts or send out bills. When ladies like this get something on their man, it's bad news for Brad.

The Brad here was a George—George Waters, attorney, a shade more fortyish than Mrs. George (Brenda) and good enough at lawyering to house them both out on Briar Brae Drive. Briar Brae Drive is money. Not quite Money, but money enough.

"Have you checked on him?" I said.

"No. If I called the office when he said he'd be working and I found him there, he'd think I was checking up on him, and if he was up to something at other times he'd be on his guard about it. And if I *didn't* find him there, I wouldn't really know much except that he wasn't there. What I want to know is what he's doing those nights."

"Why?"

She stared at me. "Why? Because I want to know."

I didn't really want to know her motive, but I always ask that question now, because once a woman answered it. "I want to know where he's meeting that slut," she said, "so I can get a gun and go there and shoot him and her and then shoot them both again." I appreciated her frankness, but I didn't take the case, and now I try to make sure there's nothing like that in prospect as I'm not in the business of fingering people for a hit.

In my experience, most women in Brenda's situation are agitated, if not homicidal—tense, fearful, angry, hopeful that they're wrong, terminally sad—but Brenda was cool. Whether, if George *was* step-

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ping out on her, she meant to do some profitable parting of the Waterses or just hold it over his head for the rest of his life she wasn't letting it get to her.

"Can you start tonight? He told me he has to finish up some work and go discuss it with a client afterward, so he'll be at his office till six or so anyhow, and you can follow him from there." She looked at me. "No, I guess he won't notice you too much. You're right, you're the type that gets overlooked."

She wasn't, and didn't want to be. Maybe that was the trouble. George might or might not be betraying his marriage vows, but those nights out he was overlooking her, and she wasn't liking it.

Someone who looked like the photo Brenda had given me and got a " 'Night, Mr. Waters" from the doorman left the office building at 6:45. George didn't seem to be a high-class enough lawyer to rate a limo and driver, or enough of a masochist to bring a car midtown, so it was public transportation, which makes tailing easier. If he was into an affair, it had probably been going on a while—in the early stages, the man will almost always take a cab to wherever it is.

I waited at the bus stop, keeping about three people between us till the bus came. When it did, he took a seat a little back from the rear door. I sat two seats in front of it, next to a window that gave me a reflected view of him.

I saw him get up as the bus was coming to the city-university complex. Was he getting it on with some student half his age or less? Usual enough. Or maybe a fling with a passionate professor? Or, of course, just bringing work to a client, the way he'd said? I'd never taken that seriously as a possibility. Brendas may be habitually suspicious and distrustful, but they're usually right when they think somebody's trying to con them.

He was first off the bus at the stop and headed toward the main building. I figured he'd likely be meeting someone in the lobby—students from the first shift of evening courses were just getting out, so there was a bunch of people milling around there. But he didn't hang around, he took an elevator. By bad luck, nobody else got into it with him and I didn't want to spend even a brief ride totally alone with him. I took to the stairs and poked my head out into the corridor at the second floor, where I didn't spot him, and at the third, where I did, just going into a classroom. I looked at the

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door after he went in, but all it had on it was 317 in scratched gold lettering, no instructor's name or course title.

I had used a couple of the guys on the university's security staff for freelance work a few times, so figured I could get from them what went on in Room 317 and how long it went on, but when I got to the elevator a skinny kid in his early twenties popped out of it and began hurrying down the corridor.

"Late for basket-weaving?" I said.

He threw me a disgusted look. "Tougher than that, man—Latin, two hours of it." He racewalked down the hall and into 317.

George? Latin? For some reason the old line about latins making lousy lovers jumped into my mind. For sure, while George was in the classroom, he wasn't being any kind of lover, lousy or otherwise.

A bar across the street was right next to a taxi stand and a bus stop and had a good view of the front entrance to the main university building. At about nine, people started boiling out of the building, and George was in the first wave. I'd paid up for the three beers I'd stretched over the couple of hours and was ready to move off after him, but he headed directly across the street into the bar and, would you believe it, the stool next to mine.

He called for a Scotch—a lawyerly drink, though a lot of trial lawyers do bourbon, especially the ones who think a little country touch works well in court—and knocked back half of it in a couple of swallows. Then he settled into enjoying the rest. He looked around at the crowd and grinned, and muttered something that sounded like it would be poetry if you could understand it:

"Bibit velox, bibit piger,
Bibit albus, bibit niger,
Bibit constans, bibit vagus,
Bibit rudus, bibit magus."

"That's Latin, isn't it?" I said.

He refocused and looked at me. "Sure is. A medieval drinking song. Only I don't know the tune. Fits this place—the, uh, swift man drinks, and the lazy one; the white and the black; the steady man and the wanderer; the crude guy and the wise man."

"Everybody drinks, huh?" I said.

"Bibunt omnes," he said. "Here, anyhow. The Latin for 'here' is *hic,* too—which fits, doesn't it?"

I had a couple of things clear about him now. Latin and drinking were George's immediate concerns, and he wasn't waiting to meet

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his lady-love or what, as I'd halfway thought when he came into the bar. There were a couple more things to find out, and at least I had an easier way to do it than tailing him all over hell and gone.

"You a Latin teacher?" I said.

"Nope. *Non sum pedagogus.* I'm learning the stuff, like a high-school kid, except from what I hear high-school kids don't take it any more."

"You getting a, what is it, high-school equivalency thing? Lot of people doing that—never finished school and go back to it years later."

He looked at me a little blankly, then grinned. "I believe that calls for another Scotch. Here, let me get you a refill on that beer." He got the bartender going on the order and said, "I don't think I've ever been taken for a dropout before, and I kind of like it. Maybe I'm a closet dropout and it's time I came out. No, I've got a couple of degrees, the B.A. and the LL.B. Double bachelor, arts and law."

"You're a lawyer," I said, raising my beer glass in a thank-you gesture. "Trial or what?"

"Corporate. Keep the machinery running smoothly by knowing what the company can do and can't do, and how to turn what it can't do into what it can—you find the right precedents. No courtroom stuff for me."

He was a good enough talker for trial work, but, true enough, he didn't have that thing most good trial lawyers have, the sense they give you that they know just why they're saying what they're saying and what effect they want it to have. Whenever I talk to one of them it's like I can see him leaning over a pool table, nice and relaxed maybe, but he's got the cue held so he can poke the ball exactly where it's supposed to go and figuring all the angles it'll make when he pokes it. This guy was just being himself.

"What do *you* do?" he said. Not that he wanted to know, but I'd brought up what he did, so the rules said he had to ask me.

"Accountant," I said. According to his wife I looked like one, so why not use it?

"Very neat kind of work," he said. "I like working with accountants, they take all the messy things people do with money and sort it out so it comes out to make a nice clear picture. The law isn't tidy, even if it pretends to be, but you guys, you know it's all going to work out neatly at the end—debits balancing credits, no matter what godawful stuff you're dealing with along the way."

"Yeah, well, it's kind of satisfying, you're right. All those trans-

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actions and things, and you finally get to make sense out of them. You may not like how it turns out, but you get it settled, which is the main thing."

I'd never thought of it just that way, but what I do is kind of like accounting. You gather the information and add it and there's the bottom line, which you give the client. And it is satisfying, I'd been right about that. Now my life, my real life if you want to call it that, is kind of messy, full of loose ends and things that hang down and trip me up sometimes. That's nothing special—your life's probably like that, and so is about everybody else's, especially the clients and subjects I work with. No real story to my life, nothing it's about. But when I'm working, the client and the subject and me, we're all about something, there are definite questions to answer, and they get answered in my final report. There you are. Satisfying.

"I would have thought if you're going to do any night classes it'd be something you could use in the job," I said. "You doing law work for the Catholic Church or something? They'd be about the only crowd that still speaks Latin."

"Not for the job, for me." George sipped at his drink. "About everything I do, you know, it's good for something. I play racquetball, it keeps me in shape, healthy for my work, good for the image. Other stuff, same thing—useful, there's a payoff, it makes sense. But not this. There's no sense to it, I just like it. I'm learning something that's good for nothing because I want to."

I didn't ask why he was getting his wife all suspicious by giving her a phony story about working late instead of telling her what he was really doing—that would have been quite a surprise, wouldn't it, coming from a chance bar pal? Mrs. George. She might not care for the notion of George playing around, but she'd understand it, likely expected it. Latin classes, though—that would be too weird for her, very un-George, and she'd give the poor guy some very refined hell for doing something so useless, and not even fun as she knew fun, when she found out about it. Which she would as soon as she got my report.

"You need to do the useless things sometimes," I said. "The useful ones, you look at them, they work out to being useful to other people in the end. You do enough of them, you get used up. It's only the useless things you get to keep for yourself."

George looked at his watch and then at his glass, which was almost empty. I didn't know why, but I said, "You got time for it, this round's mine." Apparently he figured that whatever story he'd given

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Mrs. George to cover that night's class could stretch to include time for another drink: he said okay and thanks.

"I can see that the Latin is useless enough to be worth doing," I said, "but aside from that, why did you pick it?"

"There are a lot of Latin terms in the law," George said, "but you just learn what they mean, you don't learn the language. *Certiorari, amicus curiae, de minimis non curat lex,* and so on, you use them like you do terms like 'spinnaker' and 'jib' if you're a sailor and 'dadoes' and 'dovetails' if you're a carpenter. I did that without thinking anything about it until one day about a year ago I came across the word 'indenture' in some papers. It was split at the end of a line, the 'in-' on one line and 'denture' on the next. I thought it was funny that there'd be a 'denture' mentioned in this legal document, and I looked up what it meant in the dictionary. And, d'you know, it by God *was* a denture. Not a set of false teeth, but something like it."

What it amounted to, he explained, was that in the old days when a guy signed on as an apprentice, he and the master he signed up with wrote out the terms of their agreement twice on the same sheet of paper, once at the top and once at the bottom. Then they tore it across the middle and each took half. That way, any question came up about the agreement they checked it out in the paper everybody would know was a true copy because the tears would fit together like a set of perfectly matched teeth.

"That knocked me out," George said. "Finding why it was called an indenture and how it made sense. There isn't much that makes sense, you know, so you pay attention when you come across something that does. I began seeing Latin words I halfway knew in English and I'd stop and look it up in the dictionary.

"After a while I decided to learn the language. And the further along with it I get, it's like falling in love or traveling to a new place—you just enjoy this new thing that's happening and you kind of open up and grow. You're not just a lawyer, a homeowner, a licensed driver, a Rotarian with blood type A, a husband. That's all there, but you're someone else. Makes me a little sad that I'd rather be someone else, but it's too great to stop."

George looked at his watch again. "Time to get along. Maybe I can sneak in some homework for the next class before I turn in. Nice talking to you. *Ave atque vale.* That means hello and goodbye."

A bit of the little Latin I knew floated into my mind—the title of an old movie, *Quo Vadis?* Where are you going?

That I knew—home to a lady he'd have to hide his textbooks from

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as if they were hard-core porn, guarding his secret as if it were life-and-death important to him.

And maybe it was, but she was paying me to find it out and tell her. No saying what she'd do with the truth, but that wasn't my business. *Vale,* George.

"I don't believe it," she told me.

"You can check," I said, "just the way I did this morning. If you can think of something else to say than that you're in the company's employee-education program checking to make sure he's getting all the benefits the program entitles him to, which is what I did. He's had perfect attendance for the whole term so far, every Tuesday and Thursday seven to nine-thirty. Two Saturday-morning seminars in September and October. That covers the times away you told me about. So he isn't playing around, unless there's other times you didn't mention that he's not there and you don't know why."

"No, that's it," she said. Having decided to make my report over the phone, I couldn't see her face, but her voice sounded thoughtful. Not unbelieving and scornful, as it had been when I first mentioned George's Latin class, and neither relieved nor disappointed at the discovery that he wasn't carrying on like a Brad.

"Well, isn't that strange?" she said. "You really never know what people will do."

"Only what they've done, which is what you hired me to do," I said. "Since I didn't have to put in as much time as I expected, I'm only charging you for one day, and the retainer covers that."

"Latin," she said. "Wimp City. I'd have thought he'd find better things to do with his time than that. Well, so long as I know where he is, that's the main thing. Latin!" She rang off sounding amused in a way that made me feel sorry for George.

There weren't any bills to send out or reports to write up, so I slid the midget TV out of the drawer and punched the channel that was putting out a soap in that hour.

She was named Julie, probably in her late twenties, and she'd been crying before she came into the office and looked as if she might try it again any minute. This time it was a Charlie who was racking up the absences and she wanted me to find out was he or wasn't he?

Charlie was a computer-systems salesman, which meant he was legitimately out on the job a lot, and had reasons to be all over town at almost any hour. "But once somebody he was supposed to see on

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business called him at home trying to find him, and when he came in he said he'd seen this person. I didn't want to ask him why he was saying he'd been there when he obviously wasn't." There were other things like that, and something she seemed to feel more strongly about but wouldn't specify. It's amazing to me that guys who play around don't take elementary precautions before they go home. If they can't think of anything else, at least they could get tanked on the way and take the heat for that. From what she told me, I could have given her the word right then and told her to save her money. A nice woman like her, who's not suspicious or mean-minded, when she's that upset and sad she's not imagining things—she knows something she doesn't want to know.

"He told me he has to close a deal tonight," Julie said. "But the way he said it, I think—I want you to follow him and see if—"

I asked her the same question I'd asked Brenda: "Why?"

"So I'll know what to do," she said. She looked at the top of my desk bleakly. "No, I won't know, really. But if I know what's going on, that'll put me on the way to knowing what I have to do. What I thought was my life, it's—I don't know what it is. I'm afraid of what I'm asking you to find out for me, but I have to know. If being Charlie's wife isn't what I'm about any more, I'll have to find out what is."

The company Charlie sold for had its headquarters a couple of blocks from the city university, and as I was heading there I wondered if I'd spot George going to his Latin class—it was one of his nights, I remembered. Maybe Brenda had horse-laughed him out of it, though. I hoped not—not too many guys find something that grabs them that much.

I checked the snapshot Julie had given me before I went into the bar she'd told me Charlie usually hit after work. He looked like a real Brad, a corporate surfer mix.

He came in at about two past five, which meant he'd been breezing through the office door the instant the clock began to bong. One martini, straight up, some fast breeze-shooting with what looked like a couple of office pals, and then he was heading for the door.

He tried for a cab outside but got turned away because it was on call. Finally he managed to hail one in the rush-hour traffic and as it pulled away, I slid into the on-call one and told the driver, "That's the one—keep on it."

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"No problem," he said. "That's Harry Polansky's old Checker—no lens on the right brake light, you can tell it two blocks away."

Ten minutes later, Polansky's beacon flashed bright as he slowed and pulled to the curb in front of a neon-fronted bar in the 3000 block on Main. I kind of doubted Charlie was going in there.

Sure enough, after the cab drove off, he walked across the street to where another neon sign was making it clear the Duke Motel had vacancies. I knew the place, and it looked as if it was ideal for what Charlie had in mind. Office in a separate building out front, then two rows of one-story buildings out back, feebly lit so whoever came and went at night wouldn't be noticed.

It was also ideal for what I had in mind—somebody snooping around to check on who was coming or going wouldn't be much noticed, either. I drifted across the street, angling away from the motel so that if Charlie, now heading toward the left-hand set of buildings, looked back, he wouldn't see somebody on his tail.

He didn't look back, just went into the room at the far end. When he opened the door, he was picked out in light until it closed behind him—someone was there already.

I went on over. There was a big picture window alongside the door and I wondered why. All the room looked out on was the motel office, the other row of rooms, and the side of an eight-story warehouse. In any case, nobody was looking out of the window, which was closed off with slat blinds. Slat blinds are great for giving you a feeling of privacy, but not so great about giving you real privacy. There are slits between the slats, and anybody who really wants can get a pretty clear picture of what's going on in the room by reading the slits.

Charlie and the woman who'd been waiting for him were already on the way to getting at what they'd come there for and Julie had been right to feel scared and sad.

But I not only learned what she'd sent me to find out, I also learned what it was Brenda had been after when she hired me to tail George. Not looking for anything to zap him with, just making sure he'd be safely out of circulation at certain hours on certain days so she'd be safe in coming here at those hours and days. In a way, I felt sorry for George, and in a way not. With his Latin, he was already on the way to cutting himself loose from Brenda, even if he didn't know it yet. As for Julie, I'd been eight-to-one sure that afternoon that I'd be finding what I found, but I guess I'd been hoping that it'd turn

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out to be something else. Julie seemed kind of geared for it, but I didn't think she was as ready for it as she thought.

I planned to call her around midmorning, but she was there in person when I got to the office at nine.

"I was going to do some shopping near here anyway, so I thought I'd stop in—" she said, fading as she looked at me. I must have been looking like the doctor does when he's been checking out the tests and is going to tell you that you have some serious trouble. "To see if you had a report," she finished flatly. "You do, don't you? Yes, and I know what it is. Oh, damn."

I got her into the chair in front of my desk and poured out half the container of coffee I was carrying into a foam cup from my desk drawer and handed it to her. She drank and cleared her throat. "Tell me about it," she said.

I did.

"A motel," she said. "Oh, that's considerate of him. All nice and sleazy, no glamour." She shut her eyes, and when she opened them again she looked like someone else who looked a lot like her—or maybe herself a little older.

"Well," I said, "you want to give yourself time to think this out. Get a focus on something else, then come back to this and you'll probably find you've worked out what you want to do in the back of your mind."

"Maybe," she said with a near-smile. "Do you have any ideas about what I ought to take up, Abby?"

"Something that isn't connected with anything you're doing now," I said. "A real change—something you can get really absorbed in." Me the accountant. I could see the debit and the credit columns maybe coming into line, working toward a balanced bottom line.

She looked at me hard, and I could see she trusted me and was in a mood to grab at any advice. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"There's a good Beginner's Latin class at the city university I heard about. You get into that, you'll have enough to chew on to keep your mind busy on Tuesday and Thursday nights. That's for starters," I said.

"Q"

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T. O. Teas

The Voice

He had almost calmed down when the telephone began to ring. He'd had no intention of killing anyone. It had been an accident—pure misfortune. His leg had been itching. He had needed to scratch his left ankle with his right foot just as the Underground train had been pulling in. He may also have been pushed. Certainly he had overbalanced. That was why he had come to nudge the wretched fellow forward.

First he had failed to grasp what the man on the phone had been getting at. He had been expecting a call from Vera and was surprised at the male voice. By the time he realized what it was all about, the speaker had rung off.

"Murderer," the Voice had uttered—just that one word.

But why should anyone accuse him of murder? At worst it had been careless behavior, causing death by negligence, plus failing to report a fatal accident. He was enough used to the jargon—what else after ten years practicing as a solicitor here in Budapest?

Carelessness, yes. But still, he had only been scratching his foot. He had simply been trying to keep his balance when his hand had gone forward and contacted something soft. And then suddenly the figure in front of him had no longer been there.

The victim had been short, middle-aged. He had been wearing a cheap overcoat and holding a battered briefcase in his hand. He had disappeared as swiftly as if he had gone through the trap door on a theater stage—like a puppet almost, except for that clumsy, very human movement as he had spread his arms, grasping at air, trying to hang onto something. Someone who didn't want to die.

He hoped the man hadn't suffered for long. The figure could scarcely have touched the rails before the train was upon him. He remembered one moment as the grey coat spread out—the next when the grey train was glittering in front of him.

He started for the drinks cabinet, then decided to make coffee instead. It would be better to keep a clear head while he thought the situation through. He was a lawyer, after all. And what if he had a client accused of murder because he scratched his left ankle

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with his right foot? Ridiculous. But what if he was charged? What if a real witness turned up?

Of course, he should have owned up immediately. But he hadn't. Facing it, he'd panicked—and now it was too late, too complicated. He sipped the coffee and put down the cup. As he paced the room, it became increasingly difficult to resist taking a proper drink—until he gave up resisting.

The second phone call came to his office. He was about to dictate. Fat Monica leaned back on the chair, legs crossed, her notebook on her lap, and waited for him to finish the call. Why did her legs have to be quite so stout? They made her knees almost nonexistent.

"What does it feel like? Tell me."

He immediately recognized the Voice, even though its owner had said only a single word the day before. It was a quite dispassionate, educated voice—indifferent even. Even on the first occasion, it hadn't thrown "Murderer" at him with a connotation of hatred or distaste. Rather the Voice implied it wanted him to be aware of information acquired that was being passed on objectively—out of interest.

"They say one experiences a satisfying sensation at such times. Is that true? You must know."

He put the phone down long after the line had gone dead. Monica was biting her nails. She had short nails with red varnish on them, chipped in places. The notebook in her lap drew attention to her sagging skirt in an obscene kind of way.

He started to dictate. "According to the plaintiff, the defendant deliberately locked the garden gate, thus constituting—" Except that neither of them could prove it about the bloody gate. Except it wasn't a matter of life and death if neither of them could prove anything.

"I've been experimenting," said the Voice next day, at the start of a call to the flat. "I'd never have believed one needed so much force to push someone under a train." A chuckle followed. "Oh, don't worry, *I* haven't killed anyone. That reminds me, know who the victim was? I do. It'll be in the papers soon. He was an engineer, poor devil. Divorced, with three children. Only thirty-six. So there it is. A sadly shortened life."

The line went dead again. Trembling, he poured himself a large Scotch—and then another. He stayed by the phone all evening, but it was two days before the Voice called again.

"Seen the paper, have you?"

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He didn't answer. He had seen it, all right—after going through five papers daily until he found it at last, in small type, on an inside page among the insignificant, short news items.

Now he listened as the Voice went on: "If one is waiting, one usually leans on one foot, the rear foot taking the weight off the one in front. Then if one's forced into moving involuntarily, it's going to be a step forward, not sideways. Do you follow? So, if one is pushed from the back, the weight is simply transferred to the front foot. That's provided one isn't pushed too hard, too violently."

"It wasn't violent. I hardly—"

"Don't protest, I saw it all," the Voice interrupted. "He was standing exactly as I've described, poor fellow. You remember?"

He remembered, all right—the man disappearing from sight, the roar of the train, the ghastly metallic screeching of the brakes. It was afterward that the screaming had started—and the shouting and the pushing. No one had screamed as the victim went down. He recalled all that, but not a single one of the faces as he had moved back slowly, careful not to push anyone, nor to attract attention to himself. So who was it who remembered him?

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"Shall we call me the voice of conscience?" Another chuckle followed. "Or do you find that too trite?"

"How much do you want?" He'd be confident enough if he knew the price—the purpose. He wasn't altogether surprised that the phone went dead then. Increasing the suspense was a well known bargaining ploy.

The Voice came on the line again at the office the following day. He had a client with him and wanted to ask the caller to ring back later, except he figured that would somehow acknowledge the relationship in a way he didn't want.

"I've never dealt with a lawyer before," the Voice explained.

"So?"

"It may be difficult. You're so accustomed to clearing other people. Will it be as easy defending yourself, I wonder? Acting as your own conscience?"

"Have you thought about what I mentioned yesterday?" He hesitated to ask the price again baldly in front of the client.

"Oh, yes. It's why I say it isn't easy for me to deal with you."

That was the end of the call.

It was shortly after this that he took to checking on whether he

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was being watched in the street, or followed in the car. Since the incident, he had given up traveling by Underground. Instead, he drove to work, despite the rush-hour traffic, the parking problems, and the cost of petrol. Often he took unnecessary diversions, studying the rearview mirror after every turn. When he walked, he gazed compulsively over his shoulder and backward at the reflection in the shop windows.

The Voice called regularly, every other day at least, telling him what the dead man's favorite food had been, about his having been an amateur guitarist and a classical-music fan, and about his plans to take his children on a seaside holiday.

Soon he began to hate the Voice.

Life became intolerable when his persecutor started detailing new material which would prove his guilt, alleging that witnesses had been found, people who remembered the face, described his appearance, recalled his actions.

Soon he reached the point where he almost wished the swine would inform on him and have him charged, arrested, and tried. Worse cases had been dismissed to his knowledge. But the charge was only as yet being prepared—increasing in gravity while he lost weight and dark circles developed under his eyes.

He began drinking heavily, trembling when the phone rang. He took to wandering the streets at night, drinking in noisy bars—anything to avoid being at home where the Voice could reach him. For a time he kept the phone at the flat disconnected, but he plugged it back when the calls began to come regularly at the office.

Sometimes he argued with the Voice. Sometimes he screamed down the phone that he had only been scratching his foot, that he hadn't meant to harm. But the Voice just laughed at him.

After a while he actually began to cease worrying about what was going to happen to him. Only the obsession grew within him to know who owned the Voice, how he had seen the accident, how he knew so much.

After he lost his license for drunken driving, the Voice knew about it next day, asking why he didn't take the Underground. He started using buses instead, adding half an hour to his journey to and from the office, but it didn't bother him. He even tried mounting his own investigation. He made a list of his lawyer acquaintances, then tried methodically and surreptitiously to check where each of them had been at the time of the accident. He tried to find out which of his friends and colleagues could have known so promptly about his lost

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license since he had told no one himself. He was largely oblivious that his interrogations gradually began to irritate people, to make them wonder about him.

When he split up with Vera, he had a short and senseless affair with fat Monica, whom he normally found so repellent. The girl was neither surprised nor, it seemed, particularly pleased about the development—just compliant. He had groped her one night at the office. They had both been working late and he had been more than half drunk. One thing led to another and it had ended with her moving into the flat. He stood that for a few days, then threw her out.

"I think the time has come when we should meet," said the Voice.

He wasn't surprised to learn where and when the meeting was to take place—just deeply relieved and pathetically grateful. He was to be at the same place on the same platform at the same time as before—five o'clock.

He arrived early. He watched the faces of the people who passed him like figures in an animated waxworks: uninvolved faces without provenances, without three children. He moved close to the platform edge. A tiny light appeared within the tunnel, then a train was suddenly in front of him, brakes hissing. The suffering could not have lasted long.

He waited as the train pulled out and a new crowd with new faces surrounded him. The tiny light appeared again, growing bigger, mesmerizing in its intensity. There couldn't have been much time even to be frightened. Had the man dropped the bag he was carrying? He couldn't remember.

Five o'clock drew nearer. His stomach trembled whenever a train roared in along the platform. It was as though his body had taken on the resonance of the metal structure. And with each successive train, the trembling increased—and the nearer he ventured to the platform edge.

He ceased wanting to know who the Voice was as soon as it came to him what the Voice wanted.

Yet he couldn't bring himself to do it—to jump forward in front of the continuous light, to go down under the glittering mass of moving metal. But neither could he bring himself to leave.

The next time the light appeared, he bent forward over the edge. He told himself he was curious to know what the feeling would be like if he really decided to do it.

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There was only the slightest touch on his back, the merest brush, or he might even have imagined it, but instantly he fell forward. His briefcase flew out of his hand and his arms reached out seeking something to grab.

He turned as he fell and fleetingly saw a shocked and frightened face—perhaps belonging to someone who had merely scratched one foot against the other. And then, when he was in full fall, he saw the small TV camera above the crowd. They had been introduced somewhere on every platform: he'd known that all the time. It was just then that the light embraced him totally.

But since the last moment is an exceedingly long one, he had time to think. Now he knew! His last thought was brimming with a bizarre sense of satisfaction.

He was too late to hear the pleasant, cultured, familiar Voice speaking in the measured tone of a professional announcer. "Attention all passengers. There has been an accident on platform three. Please do not congest the area. Please keep calm."

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George Baxt

Have a Nice Death

My children were quite persuasive—and, frankly, I was just too tired and fed up with life in the city to resist—so here I am in residence at the Golden Glow Retreat for Senior Citizens in Northern New Jersey. Who expected to spend his declining years in Northern New Jersey or any other part of the state? My oldest son, the devious one who nobody could possibly trust, especially his wife, offered to take my paintings for "safekeeping." It was a lovely collection. Not worth all that much, but worth enough to the son I should have given the middle name Greed. I owned a Robert Vickrey, a Ben Shahn, a Roger Baker, and a Lew Fink, as well as a Paul Cadmus drawing of a nude woman (and in his *oeuvre,* nude women are extremely scarce). "Greed" also suggested I sign over to him my various stocks, bonds, and other holdings, but fortunately, neither senile nor liking or trusting this monster I had sired (forgive me, world), *I liquidated everything*—with the help of a good friend who is neither a lawyer nor an investment counselor—and banked it in an unnumbered account in Switzerland, where with any luck it will lie moldering for all eternity.

The Golden Glow is situated on about five acres of rolling green. And don't ask me what's rolling green—they've got it in the ad, which you can't miss in the magazine section of the Sunday *New York Times.* In fact, it's not so much an ad as a threat. "Retire *here* or *else!*" Of course, before deciding to join the small army of human decay already in residence, I let my youngest daughter—at twenty-two, her own head already shakes a lot, mostly up and down—drive me out there for a reconnoiter. I was greeted with what I thought was an air of desperation by the co-managers, Miss Crownut and Mr. Hackputt, both in their middle age, though I soon realized they belonged in the Dark Ages. With what was obviously well rehearsed enthusiasm, punctuated by lots of gurglings and unrelentingly fixed smiles—Hackputt's teeth were false, yellow, and ill-fitting, like the off-the-rack suit he was wearing—they took me on a tour of the Golden Glow.

The dining room was immaculate, the kitchen bright, shiny, and impressive, and the staff was laboring over a lunch that looked like

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it needed a lot of labor. There was a "fun room" located in the basement, and a theater that served both as a cinema (twice a week) and as an outlet for the dramatic proclivities of a small group of actors. They were currently rehearsing, Miss Crownut toothily told me, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* ("which they're playing for laughs," she added with what I thought was an unbecoming smirk). If I played my cards right, she said, I could have a seat down front (God have mercy) on opening night, which was two weeks hence or thereabout.

I said nothing and allowed myself and my daughter (her name is Pyewacket) to be led to a gymnasium where a dozen or so oldsters were enduring aerodynamics (or whatever the hell they call it) under the guidance of an enthusiastic young Chinese gentleman I later learned was also the second chef. While there, one old man keeled over and they let him lay there because they didn't want to break the rhythm. I reserved comment as I was led off to view an assortment of available accommodations. Of course, while the grand tour was under way, I was being studied and dissected by a variety of the other inmates (oops, I mean residents) we met en route. I had a feeling that one or two of them were trying to wigwag me warnings, but I'm naturally suspicious anyway, having lived in New York City all my life.

It seemed I could share a room (forget it) or have one to myself for a slightly higher fee.

"I'll take a room of my own," I announced when we were settled in the office shared by Crownut and Hackputt, where we were served tea and cookies and Pyewacket lit up a joint after I *sotto voce* convinced her it would be *de rigueur* (or whatever—I was never a linguist like Erma Bombeck). "With a southern exposure and a color TV and I'm bringing my VCR and my collection of old talkies." I have a friend in Chicago who sends me cassettes of rare, early talkies. I dote on them, much more than I dote on my children, friends, or anyone else you're expected to dote on.

"Agreed," said Mr. Hackputt.

"It *has* to have a southern exposure," I repeated.

"Do you paint?" asked Miss Crownut. "We have a wonderful facility in the south wing complete with easels and boxes of crayons."

"I don't paint," I said, "I write. Obviously you haven't heard of me." Neither had a vast percentage of the world's population because I had a publisher who liked to keep my entire output a deep secret—one, unfortunately, that would die with me.

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"Oh, of course we've heard of you," gushed Miss Crownut. (Sure, she'd read my application.)

"I write—and when I write, I like to face south." There was a set look on my face, or at least I hoped there was, and it was agreed immediately that I would occupy a room-with-bath of my own facing south. I then thought of demanding one facing Mecca, but decided what the hell.

That Saturday morning, my other daughter, Abysma (seven divorces by her twenty-ninth year), moved me into the Golden Glow, chewing messily on a cud of tobacco. She didn't care where she spit and the management was obviously glad to witness her departure—at ninety miles an hour, in a cloud of black smoke, narrowly missing either crippling or murdering a foursome on the green playing Catch with a beanbag.

After unpacking, the depression set in. I thought of cheering myself up by running Helen Twelvetrees in *Millie* (1930), but there wasn't enough time as it was 11:15 A. M. and lunch was at noon sharp (barbaric). I looked out the window and noticed a potting shed secluded in a grove of trees. I love to garden. I had three plants in my apartment. (My apartment! At least I had escaped that ugly vocal coach and her miserable little pupil across the hall with the voice so screechily ugly she sounded like a sodomized parakeet.)

I sought out the gardener in the potting shed. He was reclining on an old sofa reading a pornographic magazine. "Could you use any help?" I asked him.

"No thanks," he replied affably, "I know how to read."

"I mean with the gardening."

He let out a whoop of joy. "You mean you really want to work? You really want to do something?"

"That's just what I mean."

"Well, how about them apples!" The man could really turn a phrase. He pointed out the gardening implements, the bags of soil, the mulch (really mulch ado about nothing), a wide variety of poisonous pesticides, and jugs of weed killer. A murderer could go dizzy from the wide selection, I thought.

After lunch, one of the attendants volunteered to drive me to the local village where I bought a pair of overalls, a straw hat, and gardening shoes. Within hours, I was at work in the garden. Mr. Bunkdo, the gardener, confidently put in a huge supply of dirty magazines and rarely set foot out of the potting shed other than to eat, sleep, and ablute.

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It was June and it was warm. At dinner that night, promptly at six (barbaric), I was seated at a table for four. My dinner companions were a Mrs. Ida Sankow (when she spoke her name I thought she was thanking me) and a Mr. and Mrs. Nemesis. "Call us Flo and Marvin," they said. I couldn't help noticing on their wrists the numbered concentration-camp tattoos, and they of course noticed mine.

"I was in Shloosberg," said Marvin.

"I was in Dregbein," said Flo. I told them I had been in Glossjein. We shared the same story. We were the only survivors. Our parents were murdered, our grandparents were murdered, and it's a subject I still usually find too painful to discuss.

While we were talking, Mrs. Sankow was listening to an argument between a man and a woman at a nearby table. It was a violent and ugly argument and their waitress was trying to get the two adversaries to cool it.

"The one shaking his fist in Sarah Lodke's face is Harry Capell," Flo said. "A loathsome person—a man of absolutely no talent or worthwhile capabilities, so of course he made a success as a director of television soap operas. He's been here almost a year now. He's directing the Miller play. Sarah is playing Willy Loman's wife, Linda. She wants to interpolate a few Cole Porter songs, but of course he has no imagination."

I loathed Capell on sight. He had a huge white pompadour and fat, obscene lips that dripped spittle as he shrieked his views at Sarah Lodke.

"He borrows money and never pays it back," continued Flo, the tide of venom in her voice rising with menace. "But now we're on to him."

There was a hideous outcry. Capell had brutally slapped Sarah Lodke's face and she fell back into the waitress's arms. Several people leapt at Capell and began pummeling him. One woman had her two fists in his pompadour and was shaking his head like a dust rag. Two male attendants ran into the dining room on the double and rescued Capell, leading him struggling from the room shrieking curses and imprecations in what I suspected to be a Teutonic accent.

"Is he also a refugee?" I asked after the hullabaloo receded and I stirred Sweeta into my coffee.

My three companions leaned forward conspiratorially. Marvin said in a cold voice, "Of another sort."

"What other sort is there?" I asked.

"Do you remember the notorious Hugo Kuntz?"

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Hugo Kuntz! The Beast of Dregbein! Nazi hunters were still after him. "Certainly I remember him. I knew him in Glossjein before he went to Dregbein."

"*Don't you recognize him?*" Ida Sankow's eyes were as dark as the caves of hell as she spoke these four words which chilled my blood and my coffee, too. My mouth was dry when I spoke.

"I didn't get a good look at him."

"Then get a good look at him. Go to the rehearsal this afternoon."

I sat back in my chair and whistled something tuneless. It's an unpleasant habit of mine and I sometimes think it helped lead to my wife's suicide. When I finally spoke, Flo, who was biting into a large slab of coffee cake, froze in midbite. "If you're so sure he's Hugo Kuntz, why haven't you reported him to the proper authorities?"

"We did!" exclaimed Marvin Nemesis. "But because we're in a senior citizens' home they won't believe us. That means we're senile. But I tell you, he is Hugo Kuntz. I swear on my parents' unmarked graves, that that is him, my friend!" I thought the "my friend" a bit presumptuous on such short acquaintance, but I decided to forgive it as a pardonable lapse in the heat of his hatred and accusation.

I remembered Hugo Kuntz vividly. How could I forget the man who had singled out my sisters and brother for the "experiments" conducted in one catacomb of the old castle adjoining the camp. How I escaped a similar fate is nothing I'm proud of, but then, under certain circumstances, don't most of us become self-preserving animals?

That afternoon, I attended the rehearsal. The hollyhocks, oxeye daisies, and potted petunias on the north walk near the administration offices could wait. Sarah Lodke, despite the near knockout blow administered to her by Harry Capell at lunch, was alone onstage. Other cast members (I assumed them to be) sat in the seats out front while Harry Capell, a cigarette dangling from his fat lower lip, hands clasped behind his back, pompadour nursed back to health with fresh administrations of hair lacquer, paced up and down the aisle. Stanislavsky couldn't have been more dedicated, if certainly more talented.

"Attention—" raged Sarah, as Linda Loman, "attention must be paid to this man!" She had a fist raised to the sky. And then she sang, "I've come to wive it wealthily in Padua—" Like a shot, Capell was on the stage with his hands around the poor woman's neck,

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throttling her. With the anguished cry of an animal on the scent, I rushed up and put my hands around his neck and began squeezing. He released Sarah, who fell back with a shout of glee. I had Capell on his knees when other cast members surged onstage to his rescue—or, as I later preferred to believe, to rescue me from the role of murderer.

When Capell escaped my grip, he turned on me with a look of fiendish hatred I haven't seen since I stared in a mirror not long ago, recalling Meryl Streep's most recent performance. He called me names I haven't heard in years. He showered me with threats in a voice so guttural, his Teutonic accent became more pronounced than before.

Somehow, I was guided out of the theater and back to my room. There I lay on my bed staring at the ceiling, hating Capell with a viciousness I didn't believe could ever exist in me and then surface with such frightening, demonic force.

I didn't emerge from my room until breakfast the next morning.

My three dining mates had heard of my altercation with Capell. Everyone had heard of it. I'd been asked to a meeting with the co-managers, which surely meant a warning of expulsion if I didn't curb my violent behavior. Curb *my* violent behavior? *What about Hugo Kuntz?*

I said it aloud. My three companions stared at me. Slowly, a tiny smile played across each of their lips and I felt an exultation I hadn't felt since reading Robert Ludlum's most recent bad notice.

"I'm positive," I said in a voice I didn't recognize as my own, "Harry Capell is Hugo Kuntz."

That was three years ago. Harry Capell was the first to go. It was easy. There's such a huge supply of weed killer in the potting shed. Capell was partial to soft-centered chocolates, and so I put in a supply. In time, I made an attempt at amends with Capell and gave him a bag of my special chocolates. He accepted with a sneer, feeling good because his *Death of a Salesman* came off quite well despite his Willy Loman's hacking cough and Sarah Lodke's surprise rendition of "Night and Day" just before the final curtain.

We were told Capell had suffered a fatal heart attack and they whisked his body off the premises before the other residents had a chance to think about it and unite to hack the corpse to pieces. I worried about the possibility of an autopsy, but presumably none took place because there was no subsequent investigation into the

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possibility of foul play. What was awful about murdering Capell was the feeling of jubilation the act left me with, the feeling of accomplishment, a feeling I hadn't felt since committing a cousin to an institution for the criminally insane.

Things were peaceful for a while at Golden Glow when suddenly Miss Crownut began acting strangely, shouting and yelling at Mr. Hackputt. I had a suspicion it was the result of sexual tension, a suspicion I admit sent a frisson of disgust down my spine.

At first, these eruptions occurred sporadically, but then they increased in volume and she began attacking the residents, which certainly didn't result in much good will. She attacked Ida Sankow in the room she shared with Sarah Lodke (now called "the Katharine Hepburn of Golden Glow"), calling the room filthy, unkempt, and an open invitation to a cockroach invasion. True, the ladies did keep a stock of biscuits, chocolate bars, and fruit, but then so did all of us. But for some perverse reason explainable only by Miss Crownut, she singled out the domain of mesdames Sankow and Lodke. Her voice rang through the hall like the siren call of a demented banshee and she left the dear little ladies (now two of my best friends and allies) dissolved in tears and melting chocolate bars.

Mr. and Mrs. Nemesis and I did our best to console Ida and Sarah, but they were having none of it. Ida raised a tear-stained face and asked me in a Minnie Mouse voice, "Don't you recognize her?"

"Who?"

"Crownut."

"Sure, I recognize her." My voice was as weak as that afternoon's lentil soup. "She's Miss Crownut."

"Don't hedge, buddy boy," said Sankow. "You recognize her as well as I do. As well as we all do."

"Are you saying she's masquerading? That she's somebody from another time? Like—" I paused to wet my lips. "Like the never-to-be-forgotten Harry Capell?"

"Crownut is—" Sarah paused dramatically as only a vessel of wrath could pause dramatically "—Ilsa Kuchleffel."

I suppressed a gasp. "You can't *mean* that!"

Sarah clawed at my sleeve. "Find a pretext and visit her office. You will be revolted by her inimitable display of bad taste."

I created a pretext and went to the office. Miss Crownut was not there, but Mr. Hackputt was. He had a wet handkerchief to his cheek and I could see the outline of an ugly bruise. He tried to laugh

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it off but I suspected the desecration of his cheek had been the work of the mad Miss Crownut. I expressed sympathy, which he waved away with an airy flip of his wrist.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, wringing out the sopping handkerchief in a conveniently placed pot of ferns.

I mouthed my inane pretext while quickly studying the lampshades, which were indeed revolting, but only because I made myself believe they were. You see, I had enjoyed getting rid of Harry Capell. I enjoyed that marvelous feeling that it was all *pour le sport.* Yes, Dear Listener (whoever you are lucky enough and appalled enough to have this tape come into your possession), I'm beginning to realize that committing murder is like eating peanuts—once you begin you can't stop. I know I can't.

I returned to my allies and admitted the lampshades were an abomination. There was no doubt in my mind that they were prize demonstrations of the obscene art of Ilsa Kuchleffel. When not hysterical, I reminded my friends, Miss Crownut had a secret passion for a packaged cream cake called Ooey Gooey. We all knew she kept a secret store of them in the bottom right-hand drawer of her desk. I mean, talk about invitations to cockroaches!

It was a simple matter, despatching Miss Crownut. We were told officially she suffered an embolism of the brain brought on by her sudden outbursts of hysteria. Some of us managed to behave as though we were truly saddened by her departure, and even Mr. Hackputt wore a black tie for a week. (He finally got rid of it because there was no more room left for food stains.)

I suppose the killings should have stopped there. We were arousing no suspicions and we had convinced ourselves we were doing a service to humanity. Perhaps in a way we were—we were putting people out of their misery while noshing their favorite food.

This morning I had made up my mind that two murders were two more than I needed on my conscience. Things were running quietly and smoothly at Golden Glow and my lilacs and marigolds were thriving. Then, while trimming a rosebush, I didn't hear the gardener coming up behind me, but I did hear the vituperative epithets he was hurling at me. It seemed Mr. Hackputt had told him he was letting me do all his work while he was lying on his fat rump in the potting shed drooling over obscene photographs.

"You can't work in the garden any more!" Bunkdo yelled. "Get away from here! Go on! Get *away!*"

I almost hit him with the trimming shears, but instead I went to

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my room to sulk. It was there that my four friends found me after I didn't appear for lunch.

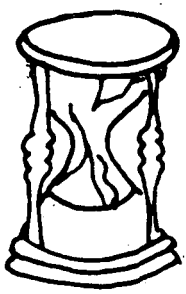
Flo Nemesis sat next to me on my bed and asked in a voice so sweet and caring that I almost wept, "What's wrong?"

My eyes traveled from her face to her husband's to Ida Sankow's to Sarah Lodke's.

"The gardener," I said.

"What about him?" asked Marvin Nemesis huskily.

"Don't you recognize him? He's Rudolph Lebberhocker, the Fiend of Fleishbane!"



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Carl Martin

The Deal

Sybil Marchand had come screaming into the world with a defiant bellow that foreshadowed her extraordinary life. Now, seventy-one years later, wasting away between silken sheets in what was certain to be her death bed, she pondered equally unconventional ways of leaving it.

A young doctor had just left after confirming the prognosis of three earlier specialists: she was suffering from abdominal cancer. The malignancy had attached itself to both kidneys and several other vital organs. Surgery was impossible. With treatment, she might live another year; without it, she had no more than six months. They made no promises, gave no guarantees.

This last physician, a falsely smiling fool like the others before him, had seemed to think that life—any kind of life—was preferable to death. She knew better. A life without quality was far worse than no life at all.

She didn't relish the thought of turning into a pain-filled, foul-smelling, whining lump—or, if narcotics were used to deaden her agony, a mindless vegetable. No, there had to be another way. A quicker way, a better way, a way that allowed her to salvage some dignity.

She considered suicide, but rejected the idea—not for religious reasons, but for purely practical ones. She was bedridden. Her energy level was very low. She could no more leave this room than she could fly to the moon. Even if she could somehow reach the study where her last husband's pistol was kept, she might botch the job and be no better off.

The same was true for any pills she might obtain. Her system was contaminated with many different medications. What would be a lethal dose for anyone else might merely be crippling for her. That left only one other alternative—murder.

Her own.

She had to find someone to do the job for her.

Luckily, her mind was as sharp and clear as ever. Sybil Marchand hadn't always been wealthy. In fact, she hadn't always been Sybil Marchand. She had been born in a small Pennsylvania mining town

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and lived the first fifteen years of her life as Sally Majcik. Then she fled to New York with a passing motorist who had stopped at the diner where she worked.

In the decades that followed, she outlived four husbands and traveled around the world half a dozen times. Most people thought her wealth was inherited, but it wasn't. Her husbands had provided the seed money; it was her fertile mind that had made it grow. In over fifty years she had never once paid more than fifty cents for a dollar's worth of goods or service, never come out second best in a business deal, and never settled for less than the best.

She was now rich beyond the young Sally Majcik's wildest dreams, but wealth was little comfort. Nor were the silken sheets and down comforter on her bed or a house filled with valuable antiques. Her only solace would be in solving the problem that faced her. Besides herself, who did she know who might do anything, absolutely *anything,* for money?

She lay motionless for a long time, her frail arms at her sides in what might have been a rehearsal of her final posture. At last, she reached out a bony, spotted, ring-covered hand she no longer recognized as her own and pushed the call button to summon her nurse/companion.

Meegan Casey, a slender woman hardly more than a girl despite her white uniform, appeared immediately. "Yes, Mrs. Marchand?" she asked with an accent that betrayed her Irish birth.

"Meegan, do you remember—the antique dealer—who has been wanting—to buy my Fabergé egg?" she asked, referring to the jewel-encrusted oval that was the most valuable piece in her collection.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Call him. Tell him I want—to see him. Right away."

She watched the young nurse as she left the room to make the call. Mrs. Marchand thought she saw a lot of herself in the girl. Perhaps if she had had children, one of them would have been like Meegan.

Aldo Lester followed Meegan into Mrs. Marchand's bedroom the next afternoon. The old woman asking to see him was certainly a switch after the way she had humiliated him a year ago, the last time he had made an offer for her Fabergé egg. As if a hundred thousand dollars was an insult! True, that was far below the market value, but a dealer deserves a profit, doesn't he? Besides, it wasn't

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as though she needed the money. The tight-fisted old witch probably still had her first alimony check.

Mrs. Marchand was propped up with four pillows. She had lost half her weight since he had seen her a year before. He could see veins like blue spiderwebs through the translucent, tightly drawn skin on her arms and hands. Rather than sinking into the soft pillows, she lay on top of them, making hardly an impression.

He had come expecting an arduous negotiation, but he revised his thinking after seeing her. Perhaps she wouldn't be as difficult to deal with as she had been. A year before she had been a formidable, powerful woman in full control of her domain. If her hold on life was as tenuous as it appeared, perhaps her grip on the Fabergé egg was weakening, too.

Mrs. Marchand dismissed Meegan with a curt, "I'll call you if I need you." She didn't speak again until the bedroom door had clicked closed. Then she said, "Perhaps we can do business now, Mr. Lester."

"You mean you want to sell the Fabergé egg?"

"No. I want you to perform a service for me, in return for which I will *give* you the egg."

He couldn't keep the smile off his lips. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to kill me," she said.

He looked away and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then back. When he looked at her again, her deep-set eyes were still fixed on him. He had made no move to leave the room and was sure the significance of that hadn't been missed.

"Of course, you're wondering how you can get away with it," she said.

"*If* I were considering it, that would be a concern," he allowed, "as would be the payment."

"Good. Then we have only the details to agree upon."

That evening, dressed in his oldest, darkest clothing, Aldo Lester approached the Marchand home after dark. He made his way up the long drive to the side entrance. The door was unlocked, as the old woman had said it would be.

Once inside, he made his way quietly to the rear stairway, using a tiny penlight to show the way. He mounted the steps to the third floor, being careful to place his weight on the ends of the treads where they were least likely to make a sound.

He could hear voices coming from Mrs. Marchand's room. He

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pointed his light at his watch. It was three minutes to ten. He was exactly on time. He stepped into a small alcove to wait.

According to their plan, the old woman was going to send her nurse to the kitchen to get her a cup of hot chocolate at ten. As soon as she was gone, the way would be clear for him.

It would take the girl fifteen minutes to prepare the hot drink. That was all the time he would need to speed the old lady on her way to hell and make it look like a burglary had gone wrong.

He heard the nurse come into the hall and stepped farther back into the shadows until she had passed. He gave her time to get well down the stairs before he entered the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

The old woman was sitting up in bed. "Did you bring something?" she asked.

He reached under his jacket and brought out a two-foot length of iron pipe. He held it out for her inspection.

"Good," she said. "Let's get on with it."

"Not so fast. The egg—where is it?"

"In my nightstand," she mumbled.

He opened the drawer of the bedside table and took out a plush case. Inside was the Fabergé egg and a handwritten bill of sale signed by Mrs. Marchand. As agreed, it carried a date six months earlier.

"Satisfied?" she asked testily.

"Yes, indeed," he said, folding the receipt and putting it into his breast pocket.

"Remember we want this to look like a burglary—you have to take my jewelry."

"I will." He set the egg aside so he could grip the iron pipe with both hands and raised it high over his head.

Mrs. Marchand turned to the side and closed her eyes. The muscle along her jaw-line tensed. He paused, staring down at her until she looked to see what was delaying him. Then, when she could see it coming, he brought the pipe crashing down on her skull. He had planned to deal only the one, fatal blow, but he struck her twice more. The first blow was for her, but the next two were for him.

He let the bloody pipe fall to the carpet—the weapon had a rough surface, so he wasn't worried about leaving fingerprints—then he hurriedly slipped the loose rings from the woman's bony fingers and dropped them into his pocket. He scanned the room to be certain he

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hadn't overlooked anything obvious, picked up the plush case, and hurried to the door.

When he opened it, the light from the room illuminated the slim, white-uniformed figure of Meegan Casey. She stood with her feet firmly spread, holding an ugly black automatic pistol in the two-handed grip of an experienced shooter. The weapon leaped in her hands four times, but he heard only the first shot.

After the bodies had been removed and Meegan's statement had been taken, most of the police left the crime scene. Two detectives hung back, reluctant to leave the young nurse alone in such a huge, dreary house after what had happened. They sat with her in the large kitchen, drinking tea and talking.

"It's lucky you heard the burglar and knew where the pistol was kept," one said.

"And knew how to use it," the other added. "It'll be a while before we identify the man. All he had in his pockets was the jewelry he'd taken."

"Did Mrs. Marchand have any children?" the first one asked.

"No. She outlived all her relatives," Meegan said. "She was alone."

"Then who'll get all this?"

"I will," Meegan said quietly. "She wanted me to have it. Said I was a lot like her."

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Janwillem van de Wetering

The Green-Haired Suspect

Algar was a well behaved boy until he grew into a well behaved man. The process could have taken no other way. His mother, a devout Christian, lost her husband, then lived on his pension, supplementing that meager income by babysitting and scrubbing floors in church. Algar became her little man.

He learned diligently at school, greeted his authorities politely, picked up firewood from the streets, did most of the shopping, and said his prayers before going to bed. He also mowed lawns. His mother included Algar's earnings on her tax forms.

God was Algar's father. Algar showed him his school reports, holding them up against the panes of his attic windows. Algar never failed his exams.

That way he grew up, until he was over six feet tall. He had wide shoulders and excelled at most sports. When his team won, his mother applauded, and when, on occasion, he lost she would kiss him anyway. Algar's good grades in high school admitted him into the Police Academy, where, as an honor student, he earned a handshake from the Inspector General. Because his appearance was both military and handsome, he was asked to model for posters that advertised the police and his image smiled from walls all over the country. His mates were jealous, but they liked him, too, for Algar was modest, soft-spoken, always willing to lend a hand.

Before Algar did something he judged the activity on its merits. If the verdict was "good," he would apply himself. If it was "bad," he would attempt to sidestep the assignment. His first posting was in the capital, which was good because that godless city had to be the worst place ever and whoever had a chance to do good in that hellhole was in an excellent position to earn all conceivable credits.

Algar rented a room above a vegetable store, with its own entrance to the tiny apartment, and fixed it up so that the quarters were worthy of a proper man's presence. He also bought a junk car, resprayed and polished it, and had the engine replaced. Whenever Algar had a few days off, he'd drive to his mother's cottage in the country. During one of those visits, he met a girl named Mona. Mona was a regular church person, too. She dropped her bag in church

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and Algar picked it up for her. The bag-dropping had been arranged by Algar's mother. Once the dropping and picking up of the bag was completed, the priest, playing his part in the plot, introduced the young people and before Algar knew what was happening to him he was half of a future couple.

But the marriage kept being postponed. Mona taught school and needed to pass a fresh set of exams so that she could improve her position. Mona didn't like the capital, which she saw as the center from which all sin was spawned. Algar promised her he would apply for a transfer to a country town with a good reputation, the right environment for their future kids. The future was mapped out. Good luck came to those who tried for the best. The road ahead would surely lead to heaven.

Algar sometimes considered heaven, wondering what it would be like up there. In his thoughts, and sometimes in three-dimensional, subtly colored dreams, he saw himself parading on a neatly clipped field. Uniformed colleagues blew trumpets and beat drums. Algar took three controlled steps forward, stood to ramrod attention, and, with perfectly arranged rows of recent dead behind him, was introduced to God.

God said that all was well. Those blissful words were the start of a party. Souls who had been around in the higher spheres for a while served delicate and tasty foods and poured sparkling glasses of a nonalcoholic beverage. After that, a blessed eternity opened up. Algar strolled along shadowed paths and saw lions gamboling with lambs on the glades, supervised by Hell's Angels who had repented in time.

Hell's Angels were the worst people Algar knew. But there were other types of sinners he abhorred. Punks, in Algar's view, were no less than earthbound devils, who prayed to Satan, that destroyer of harmony who has been supplied with abundant power on earth. God gives Satan free play in order to test Algar, to make sure that Algar deserves the potential grace held out by heaven.

Most people are content to dangle between good and bad, and what their ultimate fate may be is by no means clear, but Hell's Angels and punks would for sure find themselves in the roaring fires of a forever-lasting hell. The police, Algar believed, does more than merely restore law and order. Its strength, if properly and constantly applied, makes examples of its members. Algar's daily work as a constable serving his fellow beings was a spiritual exercise that would lift him beyond all selfish greed. He daily polished the emblem

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on his uniform cap, the sword of justice rising above the holy book of law. He cherished these signs of the high and truly mighty and detested the evil symbols that dangled around Hell's Angels' and punks' necks.

Although Algar thought along these straight and heavy lines, he never talked that way, preferring to follow the right path in silence. In the precinct canteen, he kidded around just like everybody else, and during an evening off he could be seen playing cards or pool in a cafe not far from his room above the vegetable store. A glass of beer, some mild rough language once in a while, innocent flirtations with girls who smiled at him in bars or on the street, a modern novel, an off program on TV—Algar did make exceptions, catching himself if he thought he was sliding back from the way up. There were personal tests that he failed now and then, and when that happened he visited his priest, who forgave him in the name of heaven.

There were accidents, too.

Called out to a sudden upheaval in one of the worst parts of the city one night, Algar slipped and fell into a knife held by an opposing party. The Hell's Angel didn't really intend to wound the charging policeman, but he didn't wait to explain his side of the conflict. Algar, seriously wounded, was ambulanced to the intensive-care unit of the closest hospital. Unable to break out of his coma, he wandered contentedly in surroundings so pure that it had to be disconnected from earth. An angel was his constant companion.

The angel was female and wore her green hair in tight little curls. Algar knelt down to adore her, but she raised him to his feet, snuggled into his arms, and whispered important secrets that weren't so secret after all. Algar remembered having once known those truths but he must have forgotten them while he was down below. A divine melody welled up from their bodies and made them dance in perfect rhythm. Together they floated in exotic and beautiful skies that, once she explained them to him, he remembered as well. Then their link was broken. The divine presence that Algar tried to explain to the doctors who pulled him back was part of his inner being faded and evaded his feverish grasping. He saw the green-haired angel smile sadly while, in vain, he struggled to loosen the doctors' viselike grip. "He's not altogether with us yet," one of the doctors said. "He'll need plenty of rest now—the trauma has been severe."

Algar's insides healed and the stitches were removed from his

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wound. There was no excuse for not returning to earth, but, half drugged, Algar cried and tried to resist becoming part of lower life once again.

The priest was called. Smoothing the folds in his robe before he sat down, he said, "So what seems to be the trouble?"

Algar's hands fitfully caressed his pillow and sheets. "I've lost her! Please help me find her again."

"Who?"

"The angel. She has green hair."

"Nonsense," the priest said. "You've had an overdose. Now you see what happens to those who abuse dangerous drugs. You belong in the land of the living, my boy. You're needed here. There's a reason for your return. Get better."

Mona visited, too. She couldn't stay long because her exams were coming up. She brought him a gift, made in her scarce free time. Algar had trouble recognizing his fiancee. She sat next to the bed with her hand on the sleeve of his pajama jacket. She placed her gift—a cross stretched from strands of thin green wool within a polished wooden frame—against the window. She kissed Algar and said she really had to go.

Algar stared at the cross which seemed strangely alive. As his strength returned, his daily meditation on the cross led to several violent visions. Unexplained powers possessed the green strands—pulled them out of shape so that the cross changed into a face, and later into a complete and radiating shape. The being was female, the companion angel who had guided him when he was free on the other side of life. One evening the sun sank away behind the hospital's garden wall and a deep red light shone through the wooden frame of the woolly cross. Algar, groaning, reached for the angel, for the halo that still hovered after the last rays of the sun were gone. Then a nurse came in briskly and made sure he took his medication.

Algar sighed and collapsed against his pillows. In his half sleep, he saw the angel step out from the cross. He began to groan. He didn't understand. When they'd been together before, their shared pleasure was different from what she offered now. He watched her veils split slowly and admired her lithe movements as she pranced around his bed. Was she luring him away? Didn't he have responsibilities down here? What about his planned, positive life, the obligations to his mother and his bride-to-be?

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Hearing Algar's moans, the nurse came back and switched on the light. Algar asked her to telephone his priest.

The priest smoked a cigarette with short, hardly inhaled puffs. He was in a hurry. Now what seemed to be troubling his errant disciple?

"I keep dreaming of this green-haired woman."

The priest hardly listened. "You're dreaming of your fiancee?"

Algar shook his head weakly. Mona was plump with a slightly squashed face that could hardly support her glasses. She wore her wispy hair up in a bun.

The priest continued. "It's only natural that you long for your betrothed. Be patient—it won't be long before you're married."

"This woman is different."

"Interesting." The priest stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. "What does she want of you?"

"She wants me to join her." Algar's eyes gleamed.

The priest took an interest. "Hold on, my boy. Has she got hold of you? You must shake yourself free."

"I love her," Algar whispered. He pointed at Mona's handiwork. "She comes to me from that cross."

"Amazing," the priest said. "All I see is a rather frayed abstract conglomeration of wobbly lines." He shook his balding head. "It's rather tasteless, if I may be frank. Maybe Mona should switch to a more practical hobby. Can't the woman knit?"

"This woman," Algar whispered, still pointing at the window, "is so beautiful."

"Yes?" the priest said. "Tell you what. I'll take that horror with me and get rid of it somewhere." He held up a trembling, nicotine-stained finger. "Now you make an effort, my boy, and get better soon. You're needed in this world."

When Algar left the hospital, his superiors granted him another two weeks' sick leave. He telephoned his mother, whose sister was staying at her cottage. "But you're always welcome, son," she said.

"No," Algar said. "I'll take my leave here. I've missed some lessons, studying for my sergeant's exam. I'll use the time to try and catch up."

The papers discussed imminent riots. Considerable unrest had been brewing. Red brigades fostered a general revolution, claiming that the present society was corrupt to its roots and had to be brought down with ruthless force. Several fires were started in municipal buildings and a bomb exploded in a government car, causing loss

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of life. Squatters forced themselves into a brand-new hotel and other activists urged the unemployed and restless to use any excuse to provoke the police. Large, boisterous crowds formed in the heart of the city, obstructing traffic and disturbing peaceful citizens. The police, the papers said, were being reinforced by specially trained squads mobilized from all over the country. Algar reported to his precinct but the inspector in charge sent him home again. "Not on your life," he said, "you're supposed to recover."

"Sir," Algar persisted, "can't I be of some use? I could hide in a strategic location and radio information to mobile colleagues. I could note and report on hostile movements."

"Stay out of it," the inspector gruffly commanded.

Algar studied in his room and went out for walks when the material threatened to block his brain. He walked under the plane trees of the city's main square. Looking up to admire a golden lute that rested on the gable of a spacious hall reserved for classical concerts, he saw the pale-blue sky formed a calmly detached background for the spires and curved roofs of the buildings around. Suddenly he felt joyful in his dark-blue windbreaker and tight new jeans, bouncing on the soles of his expensive jogging shoes, a powerful giant at large in a void. Whatever happened had, by orders from his superior officer, to pass him by.

And quite a lot was happening. A convoy of armored trucks climbed up onto the sidewalk and parked on a wide lawn, forming a protective circle. Policemen in battle dress jumped out of the sliding doors, whooshed their long rubber sticks through the air, jostled each other with cane shields, and broke up only when bellowed commands called them to order. A captain appeared, hulking above the helmeted riot troops. His bass voice, amplified by a megaphone, roared at the scurrying warriors, telling them to prepare for the fight. Military police, distinguished from their municipal colleagues by white straps wound around their leggings, marched from their vehicles parked on the other side of the square.

Two square heavy cars trundled along, waving water throwers from turrets covered with steel mesh—short-barreled spouts manned by grim gunners, safe behind their armor, searching for a target. Minibuses, filled with bulky detectives selected for their physical strength, drove quickly around the square before veering off into sidestreets. The nimble little cars ignored traffic lights and signaled to each other with two-toned sirens.

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Algar continued his stroll, turning a corner.

He could hear the armored vehicles behind him but the rumble came no closer. I'm going the wrong way, he thought. Good. I've got nothing to do with that commotion. I'm just out for a walk.

The city's principal boulevard, an active thoroughfare at normal times, was quite empty now. The civilians have fled, Algar thought, but I'm no civilian. —I'm no policeman right now, either. The authorities don't recognize my presence. I'm invisible. I'm out of everything.

Some murky figures darted across his line of view. Algar grimaced when he saw the hair ridges on their skulls splashed with odd bright colors, the dirty, worn leather jackets, baggy pants, and heavy boots. Beer-bottle caps dangled from paper clips stuck through their earlobes. The punks had blackened their faces with soot. Their eyes were bloodshot pools staring from dark holes. They shouted slogans and four-letter words.

One group was led by a slender girl, dressed as shabbily as the others. Her hair was dyed green and permanented into tight little curls.

"Teargas!" one of the punks screamed and wound a dotted Arab scarf around his head. "Watch it!" Algar jogged along. Behind him on the square, police constables fired gas cans from their raised rifles. The popping sounds seemed innocent enough, but the small cylinders bounced onto the sidewalk ahead, exploding into foul clouds. The gas hissed as Algar ran into an alley and kept running, for the wind picked up the cloud and blew it under his running feet. He aimed for a cafe at the next corner. The door was locked. His knuckles rattled on the glass. A waiter peered out suspiciously from inside.

"Gas! Open up!"

The waiter opened the door and Algar slipped in, followed by the girl with green hair, who coughed into the mottled scarf she pressed against her face.

"Out!" the waiter yelled at her. "Your sort isn't welcome!"

The girl wiped her face with the rag. Tears streamed from her eyes. She coughed and tried to spit out the gas.

Algar was only aware of sharp particles stinging the skin of his cheeks. He put a restraining hand on the waiter's round shoulder. "It's okay. She can't harm anyone in here."

The cafe was crowded with people fleeing the trouble in the streets. The waiter stepped aside to make room for clients wanting to look

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through the windows. Algar pushed through to the bar and passed a beer back to the girl, bending down so he could look in her eyes. Her face was narrow, with high cheekbones and a full, strongly shaped mouth. Her leather coat was smeared with dirt and coming apart at the seams. Her luminous irises were surrounded by pure white.

"How're you doing?" Algar asked.

"Fine." Her voice rang like a clear little bell. She gulped down the beer and grinned. "We started some streets back and worked ourselves closer in. We set two streetcars on fire and pushed over some cops. But now all this stuff's coming at us so we better retreat for a while."

"Smoke!" someone at the window cried. "Look at that! Pitch black, coming down the street! The whole city must be on fire!"

"You should have seen the flames," the girl said. "Bright yellow shooting high in the air. We were lucky. A truck unloaded oil. We got hold of some barrels and fired them with newspapers and bits of wood. There are plenty of stones around, too. The municipality is repairing streetwalks and there are stacks of tiles everywhere. If you drop them, they break into good-size pieces—very easy to throw. I got all the windows of a bank." She wiped the foam off her mouth with her hand. "Thanks. I've got to go now. See you later."

Algar sipped the last of his beer, smiling at the image the girl had left behind—her slender body in the oversized dirty coat. Her long hands and black-lacquered nails. A punk angel.

Then he was back on the street. A police motorcycle and sidecart flashed past, the constable in the sidecart taking photographs with a long-barreled camera. One of the mobile water guns aimed a pressurized spout down an alley. A dull-grey tank, twirling the cannon above its square body, raced around trees that offered cover for ragged insurgents. Algar turned and ran, remembering his escapes from the school fights of his youth, heeding his mother's warning not to damage his nice clothes.

He sped around a corner, stopped, swiveled, and rushed back. A military-police squad, in an attack formation, came at him rhythmically hitting their shields with their twisted-leather sticks. Algar saw the girl with green hair racing ahead. She tripped and fell. She didn't get up.

Algar hurried to her and squatted. "Are you hurt?"

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Her hands clawed at his trouser leg. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her up. "My ankle." She tried to hop away.

"Here." He slid his arms under her back and thighs and ran, effortlessly carrying her light, limp body. Dark uniforms and white helmets loomed at the end of the street. Algar swerved and rushed up stone steps leading to the portal of a mansion.

"You're so strong," she murmured.

"What's your name?" Algar asked.

"Lucy."

"You're from here?"

"No, from the country. Me and my group arrived early this morning. We don't know the city well. We should have planned this better."

"Stand behind me," Algar said, putting her down as carefully as he could.

Military policemen rushed the steps and peered into the darkness of the recessed doorway. A hard, pointed stick prodded Algar's belly. "Ouch." Algar's scar tissue was reacting with a sting of white pain. "Hello. You guys doing okay?"

The corporal grunted and dropped his plastic visor which was spattered with paint and mud, backed off with the others down the stairs.

"You're with them," Lucy said.

Algar shook his head. "I study law."

"There is no law." She showed him her fist. "Don't you know that yet? Why pretend? We have to wipe out the stupid illusion—torch our mistakes, clear the rubble, allow nature to start all over again. Not bend it to our self-made rules, go with it for a change!"

Algar moved away from her, risking his head for a glance down at the street. The minibuses rushed to and fro, howling their sirens, pushing blindly through the thick smoke thrown up by an abandoned burning truck. Detectives pulled collapsed punks up by the hair and kicked them into their cars. The motorcycle carrying the photographer rushed by again.

"Look at that," Lucy said. "Subhuman automatons—robots *we* created to keep us down."

"Stay behind me," Algar said, touching her curls gently. "We'll make a dash for it when things quiet down. It won't be long now. The battle keeps shifting ground."

A dozen constables in leather coats charged past the steps, fanned

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out across the width of the street. There were dull thuds as their sticks hit fast retreating punks.

A tank trundled along. The tank aimed a gigantic plow at a hastily thrown-up barricade defended by screaming youngsters. The street was clear. Algar put his arm around the girl.

"Let's go," he shouted.

Lucy stumbled along, dragging her painful foot. Algar wanted to pick her up again. She pointed at a bicycle, dropped by a fugitive, lying across the sidewalk. "Let's ride. It'll be quicker. I'll sit on the luggage carrier."

She picked up the bike. "Here, get on."

"But it isn't ours. The owner will come back for it."

Her eyes opened wide. "What?" Then she smiled, forgiving him his ignorance. "Everything's the property of the masses. That's us—the masses."

Algar rode the bike, Lucy leaning against his back. "Will you take me to the train?"

Algar rode faster.

"Hey!" she shouted. "Don't you have a name?"

"Algar." He turned his head. "You'll be safer if you stay with me. You can trust me."

She laughed.

"It's true. Your foot is hurt. Maybe you need to see a doctor. You can rest at my place. It isn't far."

He parked the bicycle against the vegetable store's gable and picked her up. "The staircase is steep," he explained. Her face was against his cheek as he held her with one arm and searched for his key with his free hand.

"You're strong," she said again.

"You're beautiful," Algar said, opening the door and stepping inside.

"Really? Even the way I look now?" Dimples appeared on her dirty cheeks. "You think you can trust *me?* Perhaps I'll steal everything you keep in your home."

"Feel free—it's all yours."

She looked about her in the small space, saw the framed photograph on his desk. "Your girl friend?"

"We're engaged."

Lucy laughed. "Your fiancee. I've got a steady friend, too."

"What would you like?" Algar asked. "Want to take a shower?"

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He opened a whitewashed door. "Here you are, the geyser works. The water will be nice and hot. Would you like a cup of tea? A beer?"

"Do you have a bathing cap? I don't want to wash the dye from my hair."

"Hmmm," Algar said. "No, no cap."

"Never mind." She prodded her curls with her fingertips. "You can see me the way I used to look. I can always replace the color later. Good thing the water gun missed me—my mates would have laughed at me, but with you I don't mind."

"No," Algar said. "Stay the way you are. I've got a plastic bag." He opened a drawer. "Here. You can fit it around your head."

"You're kidding," Lucy said. "Your type only likes what present society prescribes. Anything out of the ordinary's got to frighten you to death."

"Put it on," Algar said. "Please."

She took off her coat and unzipped her pants. Her face twitched when she tried to pull the pants past her swollen ankle. Algar bent and guided it gently.

"Is it bad?"

Algar had passed a course in first aid. He felt the ankle, studied the bruises. "It could be worse. Maybe it'll be all right by tomorrow. I'll bandage it for support."

"Let me have my shower first, okay?"

Algar put on the kettle, with his back to the open shower door. Lucy sang softly while the hot water cascaded down her shoulders and back. Algar dropped teabags into his cracked earthenware mugs and arranged the milk bottle and the can where he kept his sugar on the table, grinning at the thoughts that admonished him from a far past. To hide and take care of the enemy was a serious crime. But he wasn't really here—he was out, out from his self—and his conscience meant nothing now. To test himself, he imagined a set of scales and placed his mother and Mona on the left, the girl with the green hair on the right. Mona and his mother dangled high in the air. To make quite sure, Algar added the priest to the left. The scales stayed tipped. Would he dare? Why not? Algar threw in God. No change. But then God has no weight.

She embraced him from the rear. "Here I am."

Algar wanted to ask if she wanted tea but stuttered meaningless sounds. He coughed and nervously cleared his throat. He picked up the mug and turned within her arms.

"Put it down," she said. "It's time for a kiss."

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They kissed. He had to bend his knees so that his lips could find hers. The boots he had pulled so carefully from her feet must have been high-heeled for without them she was even smaller than he expected. Her hand reached around him and turned off the gas under the kettle.

They ate afterward, the entire contents of a family-size can of pea soup, from bowls that clicked against each other as they sat on the bed with her legs folded through his.

She looked at his alarm clock. "I can still make the last train home."

"Pity," Algar said.

"Would you rather I stayed?"

"Where's your friend?" Algar asked.

"In jail." She frowned. "He's a Hell's Angel. They keep catching him on drugs. He's been in for months, but next week he should be out."

"I'm supposed to be back at work in a week," Algar said.

She playfully poked his chest. "I thought you were a student."

Algar waved at his law books, part of the course that would one day make him a sergeant, arranged in a neat row on a rough board above the bed. "Isn't study work, too?"

"And the girl you're engaged to?"

"She lives far away from here," Algar said. "She never comes here. That would be indecent. She's very strict about what we can't do."

They fell asleep when the sun drew stripes across the windowsill toward the floor, and it was almost noon before they woke up. Lucy washed her clothes in the sink while he made coffee. A cheerful radio voice announced that the riots were over. Hundreds of troublemakers would be judged within the next few days. Harsh punishments were expected. Arrests were still being made and all citizens were requested to keep a sharp lookout for suspects. Any information was welcome.

"We lost the battle," she said. "You guys are still too strong. But we'll try again."

"*You* guys?" Algar asked.

She opened his closet. "Isn't that your uniform? Aren't you a cop?"

He nodded.

She shook her head. "Why are you against the renewal the brigades will bring about? Were you a spy yesterday? Is that why they left you alone?" Her voice was gentle.

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He showed her his scar and told her he was on leave.

She kissed the ragged red line. "Are you sure it's healed?"

"I'm fine," Algar said.

He kept his pistol in the closet. She got hold of it while he poured the coffee. He could hear the weapon click and looked round. The barrel pointed at his chest.

"Sit down on the bed," she said coldly. "I loaded your gun. I know how to do that. I'm a professional freedom fighter—I've been trained well."

Algar reached out to touch her shoulder but she stepped clear. "No joke." Her eyes narrowed. The gun trembled a little and her voice was a razor-sharp whisper: "You're almost dead."

"Let's have coffee first," Algar said.

Her finger applied pressure to the trigger. "Put down that mug."

"Dearest," Algar said, "you should pay more attention when your instructor tries to show you things. The clip is empty and the safety catch is on."

She threw the pistol back into the closet. "Bah."

"Would you really have shot me?" he asked as she took the mug.

"I might." She smiled. "I was thinking of a book. About the Russian Revolution. You were an officer of the Tsar and I was a Red soldier and we met after the battle near the Dnieper." Her forehead wrinkled. He smiled back. "Then what happened?"

"We were both exhausted and there were only the two of us left. I had a bad scratch and you bandaged me before you looked for food. We found a tent and I helped you put it up. It was summer. We kissed a lot but I had to tease you before you took me. We lived on supplies the Army left behind—officers' rations. Oysters and caviar, vodka and champagne. We had such a good time."

"Yes," Algar said, reaching out to take her hand. "Did it last?"

She sipped her coffee. "We swam in the Dnieper—that's a clean river, not like the smelly water here. Herons with tufts on their heads stood on the rocks. It lasted a week and then your troops came to recapture the island. You forgot me, shouted out to them, and waded out to their boat."

"No," Algar said. "*No*. How could I?"

She kicked his ankle. "You did. I was a serf's daughter, a slave—a criminal who stole something that didn't belong to her."

"What?"

"My liberty."

Algar shook his head. "I would never leave you."

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She kicked his ankle again, lightly. "You did and I killed you. There was a rifle in the tent. I shot you in the back."

The coffee spilled from his mug as she kicked him again. "You were dead. I saw you go under. Your blood colored the waves."

"What happened to you? Did you come out okay?"

"Ouch."

"I'm sorry." He held onto her hand.

"I got away," she said. "I became an officer, too—a hero."

"You forgot me?"

She shook her head.

"But, listen," Algar said. "That was long ago. Before we were born. It wasn't now."

She looked into his eyes. "It will always be now. You'll leave me again. Throw me to the dogs."

"And you would shoot me again," Algar said. "Right now. If my mates came in looking for you."

"I would," she said. "But I need some bullets."

Algar dressed and went out. At the bank, he withdrew his savings. He drove her around the city that day and later rented a rowboat at a marina at the river. He strained at the oars and later they floated back with the current. She trailed her hand in the water. During dinner in a cafe, she was stared at and discussed in angry whispers.

"I think these good people would like to beat me up," she said. "We better get out before they call your mates. I saw photographers yesterday. I'm a ringleader—that's what they most like to catch. Maybe I'm in your files."

"Not yet," Algar said.

They walked through a park and held hands on a bench. A thrush sang for them. Later, back in his room, she half dozed in his arms and he told her about his visions, how he had met her before they met.

"Oh, I knew you, too," she murmured.

"Tell me."

"You were directing traffic in your uniform, as bright as the sky. You were so tall and handsome, so strict, so correct. I was still a little girl then and we lived on a wide street. There were chestnut trees in bloom. I walked up to you and you smiled and I knelt down."

"What for?"

"I'm too tired to talk any more now," she said. "Tomorrow maybe.

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Before you take me to the zoo. I don't want to see the animals who are sick in their cages but there's a nice aquarium. The fish don't know they're caught. We can watch them swim."

The next day, he left after breakfast, found a fashionable store, and bought her a pair of jeans and a blouse—he also found her a hat.

On his way back, two constables waved at him from a squadcar. He walked over and sat in the rear. They told him about wounded mates, kicked by punks after they went down. The constables were out hunting punks now. They showed him a file of photographs. "Seen any of these?" they asked.

Algar leafed through the stack. The colored photographs were quite clear. He saw Lucy, helping to roll a drum, spilling oil, to a streetcar. Another photograph showed her throwing a rock at a store.

"Recognize anyone?" the constables asked. "It's our turn now. We've got to get them."

"No," Algar said. "They all look the same to me with their dirty faces."

"Go by the hair," one of the constables said.

"I'll slip through their hands," she said when he gave her the clothes. "You really want me to wear these silly things?" She picked up the hat. "Maybe I should. I'll be no good in jail. There'll be other riots soon. There's so much to do."

Algar saw himself explaining to the priest. The priest didn't listen. He spilled ash on his robe. "Do a good job, Algar. Defend society. Society pays your wages. Protect the good citizens' lives and property."

She kissed him. "Thank you for the clothes."

"You're welcome," Algar said.

They visited a museum of antique toys that day. There was a puppet show. She laughed when the puppets beat each other up with sticks. There was a policeman puppet, too. "Boo!" Lucy shouted. Her foot felt better and they went for a late walk. He bought her drinks in a cafe at the docks.

The morning broke quietly. A vine had crept up a gable and the early breeze made its small flowers flutter. A friendly chickadee buzzed their heads.

"Why don't you stay with me forever?" Algar asked.

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"I can't, can I?"

"Time passes through me," Algar said. "It hurts me with its claws. It tears up our last days."

"Maybe there is no time," Lucy said.

"There is. It eats us."

Her hand found his. "Then let's pretend not to notice."

They passed a church later and Algar stopped to look at the cross on its tower. He crossed himself. "Don't do that," Lucy said, pulling him along. "There's nothing there."

"No God?" Algar asked.

"Silly. Don't you know He died? We killed Him because He made us wrong. But we can make ourselves again, start over."

She thinks the other way around from me, Algar thought. He almost said it aloud. He wanted to convince her now, tell her they should marry, and afterward she'd put on a nice dress and stand at the side of the field while the commissioner called him out and made him a sergeant. After the parade, the commissioner would come over to congratulate her, too. They would be together—she would grow old with him and they'd be happy every new day. If they belonged to each other, they would belong to society together.

Algar kept quiet. In three days he had to go back to work.

They found his car and drove back to his room. On the way, a squadcar passed them, searching for the green-haired suspect.

"Bastards," Lucy said.

That night they ate in a French restaurant, with candlelight. She enjoyed the wine sauce on her steak. He took her to a concert—a pianist in evening clothes played Bach.

"A fool in a monkey suit," Lucy said afterward. "But the music was good. It all fitted, did you hear? It was like the little squares and lines on the lino of our kitchen floor. I used to look at them when I was little. Big blocks, little blocks, all in nice colors."

The last night came. They tried not to fall asleep. Algar kept getting up, to make coffee, to light her cigarettes. He had bought champagne, which they sipped slowly, looking into each other's eyes, kissing in between.

He was just going to close his eyes for a minute. When he woke, she was gone.

The pistol lay on the little table next to the bed, at the same level as his head, pointing with its hollow metal eye. He swept the gun

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into his hand. The clip held five cartridges and the chamber the sixth. The safety catch was off.

Algar jumped out of bed and opened the closet.

On the stack of handkerchieves he used to cover his ammo lay a curl of green hair.

He washed and shaved, put on his uniform, and reported at the precinct.

"How do you feel?" the inspector asked.

Algar said he felt fine.

"You still look pale, constable. You're on office duty." The inspector grinned. He was glad to have Algar back. So was God, Algar's mother, and Mona—and the priest, of course. Algar thought he should be happy, too—pleased that he knew where he belonged again.

The inspector brought out a thick file. "All the constables will be out hunting today. Check all these photographs. Check our suspects, too—there are a bunch of them in the cells. Release the subjects we have nothing on."

He found her. She wouldn't look at him. Algar walked back to the office.

"She wouldn't give her name," the inspector said. "She was picked up at the railway station earlier today. Ugly green hair under her hat and a roll of punk clothes under her arm."

"She doesn't show on any of the photographs, sir."

The inspector nodded.

"Let her go, we're short of cells."

"You can go," Algar said. "We're sorry you were detained."

She walked past him into the street.

"Pretty girl," the inspector said. His tone disgusted Algar.

Algar stumbled and fell. An ambulance took him to the hospital. "A massive internal bleeding," the doctors said. They worked hard on him.

In a few days, the riots flared up again. The police were outnumbered. They fired plastic bullets into the crowd and rammed their vehicles into massed punks that kept charging.

The priest came and listened to Algar's raving.

"He keeps mumbling about this angel," a nurse said, "an angel with green hair."

Lucy saw the attack but was slow to move away. A plastic bullet

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hit her chest and knocked her over. An armored car buried her in mud.

The doctors ordered an autopsy and had Algar's body stored in the morgue. Lucy's remains were dumped on the stretcher next to his.

His left hand and her right flopped down and touched. They were clasped as rigor mortis set in.

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William Bankier

The Baytown Races

Fred Kelly knew there was going to be action as soon as Del Spicer began hanging around. His high-school buddy showed up one night in the Coronet Hotel beverage room, nursing a beer.

"Don't start," Kelly told him as he hurried past on a bellboy errand.

"You better talk to me," Spicer yelled.

Throwing the race last autumn at the Baytown Fair was something Kelly would regret for the rest of his life. At the time, it had seemed the thing to do. Spicer's tale of woe was persuasive. Loan sharks were after him for gambling debts. It was more money than either of them could raise, and there was no time. Spicer's beating was scheduled for the following day.

Kelly was riding the favorite in the feature race of the meet. Spicer placed a healthy bet on the second favorite. Kelly steered his mount into a position from which it could not win. And Spicer paid off the thugs with his winnings.

Then was then and now was now. A few days after the beverage-room exchange, Spicer showed up one night at the Round Spot and began hanging around the bandstand. Kelly was getting set to go onstage with the group to play the midnight set. Patsy Hoh, the leader and keyboards player, said, "That big guy is trying to get your attention."

"He wants my soul."

Del put a hand on Fred's shoulder. "Can we talk, old partner?" Then he recited, like a kid in a schoolyard, "Bones are fragile and muscles bruise, I've been given an offer you can't refuse."

Kelly plucked the strings of his violin, tuning the instrument yet again. "I'm all through with racing. Haven't you heard? The group has a gig at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto. If it works, we could be on tour for the rest of the year."

"You don't understand," Spicer said, managing to look like a big whipped hound. "It isn't for me. It's for Cleveland Federenko."

Kelly had heard of the Centralia gambler. "You're the one who

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doesn't understand," he said as he went onstage. "I'm not a jockey any more. I'm not a bellboy. I'm a professional musician."

They called their group "Hayseed Hip" because they combined jazz and country/western. In one set, Kelly might play "Limehouse Blues" after the style of 'Forties swing, then follow it with a hoedown treatment of "The Devil's Dream." In the blues tune there would be a little bit of country, while the bluegrass song would contain an echo of jazz.

As usual, Walt Gerolimi, the percussionist, took too long a break in the closing number—once he got going, it seemed as if nothing would stop him short of an explosion in the kitchen. "I was gone," he said as the group left the stand. "Did anybody time me?"

"No," Kelly said. "But my suit went out of style."

"In Toronto," Patsy said, "at the Ex, you'll have to discipline yourself, Walt. The sponsor will want us to keep within a format."

"What sponsor?" Kelly asked. "I never heard sponsor."

Patsy told him it was tentative. "I'll let you know if I get it finalized."

Gerolimi was unrepentant. "What's wrong with a little spontaneity, sweet lady?"

Kelly was in love with Patsy Hoh and hoped she would one day care as much for him. He hated Gerolimi's "sweet lady" and his greedy drum breaks and his rimless glasses and his gross gold watch. "All that's wrong with your spontaneity," he said, "is its predictability."

After the Round Spot closed and the musicians were going home, a giant silhouette detached itself from the shadows in the parking lot. Del Spicer took hold of Kelly's arm. "Don't make me look bad, Fred. I promised Federenko I'd bring you."

"Now it's kidnaping, Del? What next?"

"Come listen to the man. You could make some money."

Kelly climbed into Spicer's car and was driven across the Bay Bridge and into a rundown area near the wharf. "Federenko stays in this dump when he's in town?"

"He hates dressing up," Spicer explained.

The notorious Centralia gambler was waiting upstairs in a warehouse redolent of Baytown's most famous export, cheddar cheese. "Which of you guys is the jockey?" he said, getting a laugh from two bodyguards as the giant Spicer and the diminutive Kelly entered the room.

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"I did what you asked, I brought him here." Spicer was almost tongue-tied. "But he says he won't ride."

"He'll ride," Federenko said. He was a blocky man with a pock-marked face and fists like knees. "On the horse or in a box."

"Sir," Kelly said, adopting his bellboy attitude, "I won't even be here on the day of the race. I play in a jazz group and we'll be opening in Toronto at the Exhibition."

Federenko mulled over the options. "We could kill the other musicians. With no group, he wouldn't have to go."

"Nobody needs to get hurt," Spicer said. "Kelly's a sensible guy."

"Last year," Federenko said, "Kelly does it for a friend. A little problem steering the horse through traffic, it can happen to anybody. So the favorite loses. Now I want him to do it for me. If he doesn't, the splints on those skinny legs will be bigger than the broken bones inside."

Kelly explained, "I already told Mrs. Blackburn I'm not available. She's got another rider."

The desk behind which Federenko was sitting was solid oak with legs like a pool table. The gambler lifted the desk off the floor, swung it aside, and set it down so that he could approach his visitor. "You said a dirty word. You said Blackburn."

"Lucinda Blackburn is a nice lady."

"Not her. Max Blackburn. That guy laughed at me. He won thirty grand from me in a poker game last winter and when I paid off, he laughed. He refuses to play me again. Little scum comes and goes on his property deals, won't even answer my telephone calls. Okay. I know how to get his attention. What's the horse's name? The one he's so proud of?"

"Blackburn's Pride."

"It's the best horse in the race. The odds-on favorite. Well, my money is going to be on the second favorite. And you're going to ride Blackburn's Pride so he stays in the pack. And when I leave the grandstand to collect my winnings, *I'm* going to laugh at *Max Blackburn.*"

As he was ushered out along with Del Spicer, Kelly said, "Two years in a row I'm on the favorite and it loses. They'll nail my hide to the stable door."

Lucinda Blackburn was outside the stable, brushing the chestnut flanks of her pride and joy, when Fred Kelly arrived on foot. In his pocket, he was carrying an audio-cassette which he had recorded

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himself. It was intended as a present for the horse, who was fond of hearing Kelly play the violin. Sam Parrot, the elderly trainer, was drifting around the paddock.

"Can't stay away?" Lucinda asked.

"I'm your slave," Kelly said. He kissed the fragrant cheek she lowered to his level—there was a flirty relationship between jockey and owner. "How's Blackie?"

"Pining away. He'll be half a horse on Saturday without you aboard."

"I've changed my mind about that." Old Sam was drifting closer, trying to catch every word. "I've decided to ride for you one more time."

"That's glorious! Sam, listen to this! Fred's going to ride Blackie after all!"

The news seemed to irritate the old trainer. "Off again, on again. Why can't people make up their minds?"

"Sam's been in a weird mood for days," Lucinda said. "What made you decide to ride?"

Kelly wasn't about to admit Cleveland Federenko's bodyguards were promising to break his legs. "The group is opening that night in Toronto without me," he said simply. "I'll join them the next day." He knew his job with the band was at risk. Patsy would have to bring in a stand-by fiddler. She had heard a brilliant kid from Stoney Lonesome whose tone could make you cry. Once onstage, he might never be shifted.

There was movement at the ranch-style bungalow a quarter of a mile away. Kelly recognized Max Blackburn approaching over an acre of lawn. He was carrying a wireless telephone, holding it over his head and yelling, "How come?"

"What are you doing here?" Lucinda complained when her husband invaded the paddock. "You hate horses."

"I hate Cleveland Federenko. The bastard was just on the phone, laughing at me." Maxwell's face was glistening from a shave so close it hurt Kelly to look at it.

"Morning, Mr. Maxwell, sir."

"Federenko told me you'd be riding after all. He gloated. What does he know, you shifty little baggage hustler, that we don't?"

"Max, shut up. Freddie's missing his opening at the CNE to go aboard Blackburn's Pride."

"He was on the favorite *last* year," her husband reminded her,

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"and all of a sudden he had more horses in front of him than the Russian gunners at Sevastopol."

"It happens," Kelly said weakly.

"It's going to happen again. Look at his eyes, Lucinda. He's going to throw the race. He's got a pocketful of Federenko's money."

Lucinda said, "Freddie, is this true?"

Blackburn went on. "And I've seen you two kissing in the distance. He's using you, Lucinda. Always has, always will. You're a pushover for little guys in tight silk pants."

Kelly felt a rush of blood to the head. Suddenly he knew he couldn't bring this good woman down. As he spoke, he realized his announcement could lead to a long stay in the hospital. But he went ahead and said it anyway.

"I promise you, Mrs. Blackburn, I haven't taken a penny from Mr. Federenko. I talked to him because I had no choice." All that mattered was that he set straight his employer's husband. "And I promise you something else. I'm going to win aboard Blackburn's Pride on Saturday. So if you can mortgage your mansion and put the money on this beauty's nose, *you'll* be laughing and not Cleveland Federenko.

Del Spicer's taxi smelled of pine lavatory deodorant and the floor was littered with crumpled newspapers and empty take-away food cartons. He had been just as sloppy in high school. His locker caught fire one day due to spontaneous combustion. Fred Kelly rode in the front seat beside the driver, Baytown fashion.

"You got me into this, Del," he said. "It's up to you to help me get out."

"Count on me."

"First we have to tell Patsy why I'm riding on Saturday, after all."

"Because you're throwing the race so I can win a lot of money and pay off the loan sharks." Spicer was a fast driver but slow in everything else.

"That was last year. I'm not throwing the race this year, Spicer. I'm going to win for Lucinda Blackburn. I love that woman, which is a torment because I also love Patsy Hoh."

"The other night I drove Patsy and that crazy drummer, Gerolimi. They were all over each other in the back seat."

"I don't own her, I love her," Kelly said, experiencing a spasm of jealousy. "The other thing you have to do is drive the escape car

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after the race. Federenko's bullies will be looking for me. I'm borrowing one of the Blackburn limos. You'll chauffeur me to Toronto—with the tires only touching the road on the high spots."

The Paragon Cafe was quiet. Patsy Hoh, looking sweet in her waitress uniform, was able to bring the boys their grilled cheese sandwiches and coffee and then sit with them in the mirrored mahogany booth.

"So I have to ride on Saturday," Kelly concluded the explanation. "It means a lot to Lucinda Blackburn. She's been good to me."

Patsy suspected she wasn't being told everything. She was half musician and half businesswoman. The kid from Stoney Lonesome had been after her for weeks to play with the group, ever since Walt Gerolimi introduced him. She knew Walt was trying to squeeze out Kelly for personal reasons, but that was beside the point. Her money was still on Kelly. Growing up in Baytown, where her father owned the Paragon, Patsy had always admired Fiddling Freddie Kelly, the Child Hoedown Phenom, as he was billed at summer fairs and Kiwanis dinners. He was a Baytown institution and she believed his career ought to continue.

"I understand you have to ride," Patsy said. "But the group has to play that night in Toronto. We can't leave out the fiddle—I'll need somebody standing by. And he'll have to be paid out of your cut."

"I'll be there," Kelly said. "Tell her how it goes, Del."

Spicer explained how he would be standing by at the wheel of one of the high-powered Blackburn limos with the engine running. "Fred comes on the double after the race. He doesn't even change his silks—he does that in the back seat as I drive. We'll be in Toronto ten minutes before leaving Baytown."

"Take it easy on the curves," Patsy told the taxi driver as she got out of the booth and went back to work. "The other night, you threw Walter Gerolimi all over me."

Gerolimi showed up at Kelly's apartment on Saturday morning as Fred was packing his bag. The jockey was wondering whether to put in the little cassette player with the tape he'd recorded of "Twelfth Street Rag" he'd forgotten to turn over to Lucinda or Sam Parrot on his visit earlier in the week. It would make a nice farewell present to the horse.

Now here was the percussionist with a brown paper bag in his hand. "If you've got the coffee, Kelly," he said, "I've got the pastries."

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At the kitchen table, chewing a cherry danish and sipping freeze-dried instant, Kelly said, "You and I have been three years together in this group. We share the stage, then we go our separate ways. I didn't think you knew where I live."

"Patsy told me. She knows. She's been here, hasn't she?"

"What gives, Walter?"

"The group does a number called 'Takes a Worried Man To Sing a Worried Song.' I came here to sing."

"What's the problem?"

"I think I made a mistake. I wanted you gone because Patsy won't look at me when you're around. But sonofagun, I don't want you in the ground."

"What are you talking about?"

"I heard you the other night. You were talking to Spicer about the race and how you promised Cleveland Federenko you'd throw it. But now you intend to win."

"So?"

"So I found out where Federenko is staying and I went and told him what you had in mind. I was drunk, it seemed like a good idea. But he has these two big guys. Federenko told them they might get to beat you up after all, and they said they liked it." Gerolimi had tears behind his gold-rimmed specs. The sight of the drummer breaking down was more upsetting to Kelly than news of his impending destruction at the hands of Federenko's two-man wrecking crew.

"Don't take it so hard," he said. "If they were going to fix me, they'd have done it by now."

At the door, on his way out, Gerolimi said, "When this is over, and if you survive, can you and I be friends?"

"Have a heart," Kelly said.

Kelly didn't see Federenko when he arrived at the Fair Grounds on Saturday, but he saw the two bodyguards. They were behind the grandstand on the gravel pathway leading to the stables. Sam Parrot was with them, and when he saw the jockey he turned and walked away.

"Here comes Willie Shoemaker," the bodyguard with the razor scar said.

"Here comes Eddie Arcaro," the other one said.

"You may as well inform your boss," Kelly told them. "I'm riding to win. And you guys can do your worst." Psyched up for the race,

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he found bravado came easily. But at the back of his mind, he saw himself on his knees, pleading for mercy.

The thugs laughed. "Don't fall off."

"Drive slowly."

One of the stable boys saw Kelly coming. He was leading Blackburn's Pride on a gentle walk in circles and he appeared concerned. "Blackie don't look so good."

It was true. The horse seemed lethargic, its eyes a trifle glazed. Kelly slapped the animal's neck and spoke. The response was dulled.

Kelly understood what had happened. Hearing from Gerolimi that Kelly had changed his mind, the gambler had arranged some insurance.

Kelly went looking for Sam Parrot.

The trainer was behind the stables, smoking a fragment of cigarette.

"Sam, what's the matter with our horse?"

"Could be getting a cold," Parrot said.

"You gave him something. You took money from Federenko."

Parrot showed Kelly the incurable resentment of age for youth. "You've got your band. You've got your girl. You're getting out of this dead-end place. Fred, they offered me a fortune."

"You picked a fine time to turn sour."

"I only gave him a little shot. The horse won't be hurt. He just won't have his concentration."

"I should call the cops."

"I'll deny everything."

Fred Kelly wasn't racing at Aqueduct or Santa Anita. This was the Baytown Fair on a Saturday afternoon and there were not a lot of stewards and vets around. He could blow the whistle on Parrot and refuse to ride. But how would that help Lucinda Blackburn?

While he changed into his silks—the black, heliotrope, and scarlet of the Blackburn stables—Fred wondered what to do. Federenko was probably above the law even if a case could be proved against him. Old Sam might end up banned, but how would that improve the course of history? What Kelly really wanted was to win the race so that the obnoxious gambler would take a financial bath and Lucinda would have the last laugh.

The idea came to him as he was on his way to the paddock where the jockeys were waiting to mount up. It was worth a try. Hurrying

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back to the locker room, he took from his jacket the cassette player with its earphone at the end of a long wire.

Back at the paddock, he was the last one to be helped into the saddle. Then, as he followed the other horses toward the track, he tucked the machine into the elastic waistband of his satin pants and nested the padded earphone inside Blackie's ear.

They were passing the grandstand. In the VIP enclosure, he saw the Blackburns and gave them a thumbs-up. Lucinda looked eager while Max flashed his cynical stare. He had suggested the race was fixed. Now Kelly would risk everything to prove Blackburn wrong. Federenko was half hidden between his bodyguards, looking as if the earth was revolving just about as he had planned. Standing near an exit ramp was Del Spicer, who lifted his hands and made steering-wheel motions.

Blackburn's Pride moved toward the back straight where the race would begin. His head was down and Kelly could sense the absence of his usual energy. Whatever Parrot had given him was working perfectly. The horse was going to run, but he would experience an off day.

The Baytown races didn't use a starting gate. The season was brief and trucking in the device from Toronto or Montreal didn't make financial sense. A few years ago some of the boys at the railway shops built one. It looked fine—a row of narrow enclosures for the horses, with barriers at the front that sprang open when the starter pushed a button and the bell rang. On the day they tried it, the bell went off and the horses charged forward, but the barriers didn't open, so there was a cascade of jockeys out the front and onto the dirt track. So they towed the gate away and went back to using the old method of lining the horses up behind a wire.

Kelly guided his mount to an open space on the outside. There was no assigned order, and he wanted a clear getaway without the danger of being bumped. He needn't have worried. When the wire flew up and the horses cantered down the track, Blackburn's Pride stayed in place and only began to move when Kelly urged him forward as if they were delivering milk.

The race was one mile—two circuits of the track. If he didn't get his animal going, Kelly would soon have the field coming at him from behind. He switched on his cassette machine and, leaning forward, heard from Blackie's ear the faint sound of his fiddle going into a brisk rendition of "Twelfth Street Rag."

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The horse perked up and began to trot. "*Attaboy, Blackie, let's go!*" Kelly began to sing along with the fiddle. "*Yadda dadda dah! Yadda dadda dah!*"

A transformation was taking place, lethargy supplanted by energy. The famous stride of Blackburn's Pride was flowing now and the crowd roared as lone horse and rider passed the grandstand for the first time, closing rapidly on the field far ahead.

"Eat 'em up, Blackie!" Kelly yelled as the fiddle squealed the horse's favorite tune in the noble ear and the elegant hooves pounded the dirt track. They were overtaking the back marker, a horse that would never win anywhere, and Kelly's mount, the one that was born to win, thundered past and went in pursuit of the next. Passed him, too. Passed three others in a pack. Halfway down the back stretch now and not so far from the front runners.

There was too much to be done. They were going to run out of track. Blackie was full of racing, but they had left it too late. Then Kelly heard a wild chattering from the horse's ear. His cassette player was faulty and occasionally ran at increased speed. It was doing this now, reproducing the fiddling in a higher, faster mode. The horse caught the manic interpretation and strained forward, adjusting its running tempo to match the music.

The crowd was going mad as the pack rounded the final turn into the home stretch with the favorite, Blackburn's Pride, storming up from behind, overtaking the last of the leading group, charging on through, steaming up on the shoulder of the leader, matching him stride for stride in the final furlong, bursting past, a nose, a head, a neck, half a length, *won* dammit, won the race, having spotted the lot of them a hundred yards before even starting to run! Glory, glory, hallelujah, the crowd would never forget it if they were to live forever!

Fred Kelly's life was in its final hour if the expression on the face of Cleveland Federenko was a true indicator. The winning horse was saluted in the circle. A trophy was presented to the Blackburns. Kelly accepted congratulations from all sides, then darted around the Centralia gambler and ran to the main gate, where he found Del Spicer at the wheel of Lucinda's limousine with the door open and the motor running.

"Do you see what I see?" Spicer said as they got underway. The taxi driver sounded depressed.

Kelly glanced back and saw Federenko's bodyguards getting into a car that looked every bit as powerful as the one he was riding in.

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"Can you lose them?"

"I can try," Spicer said. "But everybody knows you're playing tonight at the Ex. These guys are going to show up. And you're going to have to deal with them."

Kelly said, "Cheer up, Del. You sound like you're driving a hearse."

Toronto was bustling on this late summer night. The city was crammed with visitors to the great Exhibition. Spicer had managed to put a mile or two between himself and the pursuing hoodlums, but there was such a mass of traffic waiting to enter the park that by the time they were inside Federenko's men had them in sight. One of them got out of the car and took up the pursuit on foot. He was speaking into a walkie-talkie radio.

Kelly said, "This is the crunch, Des. There's no reason for you to get hurt. Run for it."

"Look, there's a security guard."

"What's the point? They can't arrest anybody until something happens."

Del kept pace with his friend. "Where do you play?"

"Patsy gave me a pavilion number. E-7. It must be ahead on this side."

The bodyguard was giving directions on his handset as he kept the quarry in sight.

"This is E-7," Spicer said. "How do you find your gig?"

They were through the doorway. "Easy," Kelly said. "Listen."

The distinctive music of Hayseed Hip could be heard not far away. Kelly followed the sound and came to a platform in an area painted two shades of blue. Patsy saw him, gave him a wave, and pointed to his fiddle resting on a chair. There was no sign of the replacement musician, the kid from Stoney Lonesome.

Patsy came off the platform to welcome Kelly with a hug.

"I'm still in trouble," Fred told her. He looked back and saw his giant pursuer, who was joined, as they watched, by his even larger confederate. "Those are Federenko's bully-boys. And they're here to break my head."

"They aren't liable to get the chance," Patsy said. She turned to a man seated at a desk stacked with pamphlets. "Sergeant Logie, can I have some assistance, please?"

She said to Kelly, "The sponsor I told you about is the Ontario

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Provincial Police. They're running a recruiting campaign. Tell the sergeant what those men are doing."

Logie seemed more than willing to protect Patsy Hoh. He heard what was going on, spotted the hoodlums, called in a couple of colleagues, and within minutes had Federenko's men under arrest for carrying weapons without a permit. He reported later, "Federenko hires lousy employees. Those two are only interested in saving their own skins. The pair of them are singing like the Mendelssohn Choir. We should get enough evidence to bring Mr. Federenko into court for a long-overdue trial."

Del Spicer drew Kelly to one side. "Will you be needing me any more?" he said, swinging the keys of the Blackburn limousine.

"Not now, my friend. See you back in Baytown."

"No, this is goodbye."

"What's up?"

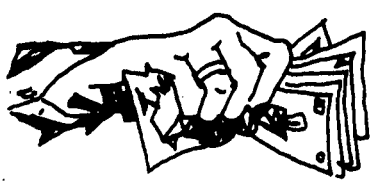
"I can't go home. No taxi, no money, I'm flat broke."

"What happened?"

"I'm going to sell this fancy car to any dealer who won't ask questions, then I'm going to take the money and travel."

"I asked you what happened," Kelly said, sensing the answer before it was delivered.

"What do you think?" Spicer said. "I wasn't going to go against Federenko. I bet my shirt on the horse you beat at the wire."



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Elizabeth Byrd

Lilybane

When David was safely on the train to Edinburgh in charge of an alert conductor, I drove back to the cottage, wishing I hadn't rented it. In the heat haze it looked unnatural, like a white-cardboard stage set placed among real trees. The stream, which had attracted me on first sight, was now sullen and sluggish and a monstrous yellow spoor had settled near it. The garden roses, dainty at noon, had swollen as if they'd been fed in my absence. One burst its petals as I looked at it.

Across the road was another summer cottage, a twin to mine. I'd hoped a family would move in but it remained vacant. David so needed playmates—flesh-and-blood playmates, not that horror of a woman he'd invented. He'd drawn her picture several times—an egg-shaped face, chalk white; long, orange-red hair; and her smile was a leer or else she had a weed in her mouth. Somehow my six-year-old had portrayed a sly, degenerate face. He'd named her Lilybane.

In a way his invention was clever, because he'd created an adult who usurped my authority, who permitted him to strew his toys, defy baths, and rebel against certain foods. "Lilybane says carrots are poison. Lilybane says I'll throw up this salad." Lilybane thought reading was silly, and the stories she told were much better than mine.

It was eerie how he talked to her all the time. And I'd catch him at the biscuit box seeming to feed her, not himself. But the worst thing was how, when I came to tuck him into bed and kiss him goodnight, he'd wriggle to the side of the pillow and say, "She's already *done* that, leave us alone." I'd turn off the lamp feeling sick.

It was a lonely, helpless feeling such as I'd felt before I adjusted to divorce. I rang up friends for comfort and the other mothers laughed and assured me that imaginary playmates never endured long. David would forget Lilybane when he started back to school. Meanwhile, I should just be tactful and pretend she didn't bother me.

So I tried to join in the game. "Where did you meet her, David?"

"Outside by the stream. The day we moved in. She said I was her

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big boy and could do as I pleased." He giggled and rolled his eyes around. "She says you're a stupid old scaredy cat. Just 'cause *you* can't swim you don't want me to—well, she can and I will."

"We'll both have swimming lessons when we get back to Edinburgh," I told him. Then, "How old is Lilybane?"

"Can't you see?" he asked contemptuously. "You must need glasses."

"Introduce me," I said, trying to smile. I put out my hand to the right but he moved it to the left, lifting it, then dropping it.

"She says she doesn't want to be friends with a old bitch."

"David!" He'd become startlingly precocious in just three weeks. "You don't use words like that."

"My name's not David, it's Henny." Then he said, "You better do as she says. She wants a cocktail."

"You can have a Coke if you want," I said, exasperated. But uneasy, too. This use of the word 'bitch' wasn't our language and at home in Edinburgh children were put to bed before parties. "I'm not waiting on Lilybane."

He looked up at me and said, "Fook you."

It took all of my will power not to slap him. "If you ever say that again, David, you're in deep trouble."

Now, alone in the cottage, sitting in the living room with a cup of tea, I worried that he'd be a problem to my mother. But I'd had to get him away from here. He knew the stream was forbidden unless I was present, but early that morning he'd sneaked out to it and, missing him from his bed when I went to wake him, I'd hurried outside. He hadn't waded in far, but he was caught in the roots near the bank and his legs were bleeding. When I applied first-aid, he strutted around showing Lilybane the Band-Aids. Two hours later I had him on that train to safety.

I didn't tell Mother about Lilybane. I just said the stream was dangerous, a temptation he couldn't resist, that I'd close the cottage next week and join them. I said I'd made a mistake in renting the cottage, which was cheap, but too remote. And there were no kids around for David to play with.

She laughed. "He wants to be called Henny." She said he was fine, bragging about his wounds, and playing with Billy next door. Tomorrow they were going to the zoo. I wanted to ask if he mentioned Lilybane, but decided there was no reason to bother her with a nasty story.

After supper, it was cool enough for a fire and I sat by it, but with

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a chill inside me, facing the fact that in some way I must have failed David. We had been such good companions until recently that it hadn't occurred to me he'd be so bored and lonely he would have to invent an intruder. And why, of all non-people, Lilybane? It wasn't as if I was overstrict with him. But away from here he'd surely forget her, and I would forget this nagging feeling that I was to blame.

The clock struck eight and I jumped. Nerves. The shifting shadows on the low white ceiling were like fingers stroking it. They made me uneasy, and though I tried to laugh at myself I couldn't. It wasn't at all like me to be fanciful.

It was nonsense—to believe in ghosts was utter rubbish—yet if she had lived here, I had to know. It wasn't too late to phone Mr. MacDonald, the estate agent. He'd given me his number at home in case of emergency.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

I couldn't admit the truth. "No, but my little boy starts back to school soon, so I'm moving on Monday. I'll leave the key at the post office. By the way, did someone named Lily Bane ever live here?"

"No," he said. "Not in my time, anyway—not in the past nine years. Why?"

I lied. "A letter came addressed to her. I gave it back to the postie—he didn't know of her, either."

We hung up and I returned to the fire. Bane—an odd word. Didn't people say "the bane of my existence?" I took down the dictionary and looked it up. It was more unpleasant than I'd thought.

A.S. *bana,* slayer: to strike, wound as in Sans. *banta,* ill, made sick. 1. (poetic) deadly harm; ruin. 2. the cause of harm, death, etc. 3. deadly poison.

The cottage was so still—silent except for a tumbled log that made me jump again. I couldn't sit here like a frightened schoolgirl or a dotty old lady expecting a phantom visitor. Work was the solution. But I couldn't begin to pack my books until I got cartons from the grocer and there was little else to do until I left on Monday.

But I could tidy David's room, remove his sheets and put his remaining clothes in a suitcase. The sketches he'd made of Lilybane I had already burned in the fire, as if she was a witch.

In his room, I noticed two ugly words he'd chalked on the wall. As I caught my breath in disbelief, something—someone—breathed beside me. I held my breath as a test, but that other breath continued as if it—she—was waiting for him and I fled to my own room.

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I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. With the first morning sun, I took courage from tea and toast and felt sufficiently brave to go back and clean David's wall. Scrubbing, I decided he must have heard those words in school and somehow managed to spell them correctly. And the heavy breathing last night had been my imagination.

But I was grateful when I heard a car drive up at noon. Parents and a little girl about David's age got out, came to the door, and asked if I would mind if they picnicked out back by the stream. And would I join them? I made them welcome, and later I brought chocolate biscuits to them out by the stream. Dorothy, the little girl, was pulling off her T-shirt and saying, "I want to swim."

"No," said her mother, "you can't. You know you can't. You don't know how."

"*She* says I can."

I sprang up from the grass and caught Dorothy's arm. "*Who* says you can?"

She turned and smiled. "Lily says so. Lilybane says so. She says we're not to wait for Henny."

My heart jolted. I looked at Dorothy's parents and words tumbled through my shock. "Don't let her even wade here—this place, this stream, is polluted. It's so bad that I—if I pack a bag, will you give me a lift to Edinburgh?"

I was far too upset to drive my own car and they said of course they'd take me, but what a shame to leave such a lovely little cottage.

"The one across there is vacant," I said by way of explanation. "Now I know why. Why somebody left it, I mean."

I packed an overnight bag in a panic. Next week I'd return with a friend and clear out. And no matter how silly he thought me, I'd have a truthful talk with Mr. MacDonald. As a father he might possibly understand that no family with children should rent here.

Sitting in the back seat of the car with Dorothy on the ride to Edinburgh, she grinned and kicked my foot. "Scaredy cat," she said. "Lilybane can swim. She has a baby there in the water. It's got weeds in its mouth. He's named Henny but she said he can't come up for a while."

"Q"

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Robert Barnard

Sisters

The light burned late in Virginia McBride's office on the sixth floor that evening. The Humanities Building was set apart from the other blocks—from Administration, from Physics, from the Social Sciences—and it was surrounded by walkways and casual trees and shrubs, as if the humanities were delicate plants to be sheltered and cosseted. So the light could be seen from the rest of the University, a pilot beacon surrounded by pitch blackness. Not that anyone much was around to notice. People went home at five at the University of Borrowdale, West Dakota. And the light in Virginia McBride's office often burned late.

Virginia drew a firm line under the last words she had written, and screwed a half smoked cigarette to extinction in her already overflowing ashtray. Finished. Ready for delivery tomorrow at the conference. Virginia liked giving reports to large assemblies, liked hearing her clear, forceful, indignant voice ringing round a hall, liked seeing the rows on rows of passionate female faces. The Ninth National Delegate Conference on Women's History, to be held in Chicago, would be the high spot of her year, the largest, most prestigious assembly she would address.

The discovery of Women's History had been a godsend to Virginia. Till then she had toiled in the doldrums of trade statistics from Nineteenth Century Boston, though in the early Sixties she had dabbled in Black Studies and even taught a couple of courses, *faute de negres*. But this was something much more exciting. Here was a whole new area—half the population ignored by historians and slighted by contemporary chroniclers—and one in which she suffered none of the humiliating disabilities which compromised her usefulness in the field of Black Studies. So untapped was this field, so sparse the information on even quite important aspects of it, that it left infinite room for conjecture, wild assertion, unbridled indignation. Virginia thrived on indignation. She organized it. She got together little groups, merged them into larger groups, and orchestrated their indignations. Feminism essentially was, for her, a trade union of professional women advancing their own and each other's careers. She got scholarships and grants for her friends and disciples

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and they got visiting professorships and distinguished-guest lecturing spots for her.

Luckily the kids had left home early. The youngest, Alexander, had been shipped back East to his father after the unfortunate letter to the local paper. Then she'd been alone, free to pursue her professional career, free to pursue the various causes that made demands on her leisure time—the Pressure for Equal Standing group, for example, which had, among other worthy, trailblazing enterprises, brought such effective pressure to bear on the local symphony orchestra to give equal time to women composers that they had revolutionized its concert programs (and emptied the concert hall). Virginia, hating to be closed in, opened the window of her office and gazed out over the campus—her church and her battleground—with a grim smile on her face. Yes, life was full for Virginia.

The light burned late, too, in the secretaries' office on the other side of the Humanities Building. Susan Cox sat behind a spectacularly clean desk and talked into the phone.

"What am I doing? Twiddling my thumbs, that's what I'm doing. My desk is so hygienic you could eat off it. All I'm doing is sitting around waiting for this report that's got to be typed. —Yes, I'll see you at eight-thirty. Nothing's going to keep me away. I'm really looking forward to the party afterward. Great that it's Saturday tomorrow. Just get Madame Associate Professor McBride's report typed and I'll be off home to change—hey, I think that's her."

And she banged down the phone and sat by her pristine desk, the typewriter uncovered, ready for action.

Virginia McBride came swinging into the room, all sensible suit and sensible shoes, all short hairdo and thick-rimmed glasses. Well preserved she was, like a pickled damson. Could easily be a no-nonsense thirty-five, though in fact she was ten years older than that.

"Here it is," she said, slapping a sheaf of papers down on the desk. "I'll pick it up for proofreading in an hour."

Susan picked up the sheaf and cleared her throat at the departing square-set back. "Professor McBride—"

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid I won't be able to get this finished tonight." Virginia swung round, but Susan held her ground, leafing through the wodge of paper. "There must be fifteen pages or more to type here. I have

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to be gone by seven-thirty—seven-forty-five at the very latest. Of course I'll do as much as I can."

Virginia McBride looked at her steadily. "I don't think you quite understand the position, Miss Cox," she said, her voice slightly raised, as if talking to an idiot. "Professor Lindgren must have explained to you that someone had to be here this evening to type my report for Chicago tomorrow."

"Professor Lindgren *asked* one of us to stay back to type it. All the others said no. I said I'd stay till seven-thirty."

"I'm afraid you'll just have to revise your plans, then."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Professor McBride."

Virginia McBride came back toward the desk and bared her teeth into an alligator smile. "You need this job, don't you, Susan?"

Susan Cox flinched at the Christian name. Christian names always went with threats for Virginia McBride. But, oh, yes, in her position she needed the job. And Virginia McBride had Professor Lindgren well and truly under her thumb.

"I like it here," said Susan cautiously.

"Well, then," said Virginia, the smile widening still more ferociously, "I suggest you get down to that report."

"Professor McBride, I have a date at eight-thirty."

"Then you'll just have to cancel it, won't you, Susan?"

Virginia closed the door of the secretaries' office firmly behind her and marched down the corridor. Susan Cox had already been put completely out of her mind. It was Virginia's great strength that she could concentrate totally on the matter in hand and ignore side issues. There was to be an evening meeting tomorrow in Chicago after the main session—an exclusive, ticket-only, gin-and-tonic affair where many of her ex-students, colleagues, and professional cronies would be getting together for self-help and mutual congratulation. They would certainly expect a little impromptu address from her. Something inspirational.

"The history of women which we here are beginning to write," she improvised to herself, "is one of suppression, of a domination authorized by State and Church and more terrible in its effects than any of the right- and left-wing tyrannies we have known in our lifetime. The denial to women of an independent existence, the untrammeled assertion of male authority, the suppression of all feelings of sisterhood by that half of the pop—"

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She clicked her tongue with annoyance. The cleaner had gone into her room and was busy with bucket and mop.

"I'm afraid I'm still working here," Virginia said, walking in over the wet floor.

"Won't be a minute," said Mrs. Makowski, mopping up.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to come back later," said Virginia, sitting down at her desk and opening a new packet of cigarettes.

"This is the last office on the sixth," said Mrs. Makowski, her hands on her sturdy peasant hips. "If I go down to the fifth, this won't be cleaned till Monday night."

"I shall most certainly expect to find it clean when I get in Monday morning," said Virginia, calmly settling down to make notes for her impromptu address. "If it weren't, I would naturally send a note to Administration. It's up to you, isn't it?"

Mrs. Makowski bit her lips, as if sewing them together to prevent words escaping, but she went out to the corridor.

"Darling, I know. Do you think I'm not mad, too? But so long as I want this job that bitch has the upper hand."

Susan wondered whether her boy friend would propose on the spot. Would he say, "Chuck up the job and marry me?" She was a divorcee of twenty-eight, living with her mother and a daughter of three. Life wasn't easy. If he proposed, would she accept? Simon was an artist. He had a gallery-showing tonight and a party afterward. She'd been looking forward to it for weeks. And quite apart from that, she'd be letting him down.

Simon did not propose.

"Look, I'll be there for the party," Susan said, relying on her power to soothe him down once she was there. "The quicker I'm through with this, the sooner I get there."

She put down the receiver and went back to her manuscript. Virginia's writing was a mess. What was this? "Women are beginning to seige—" no, "seize the opportunities—"

Some women, thought Susan bitterly.

Virginia McBride went down to the Common Room on the fifth floor to make herself a cup of coffee. Luckily, the kettle was on and steaming, so she poured it over the instant coffee in her cup and sat at one of the tables skimming through the local paper. She had stopped taking it since her son had written that protest letter about how children were used as unpaid domestic slaves. Another of the

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cleaners came in, a Mrs. O'Hare, a fat old thing with a foul Irish temper. She took the lid off the kettle and peered inside.

"Here, that was for my cup of tea," she said.

"Plenty more water in the tap," said Virginia, and she crumpled up the paper and went along to the office.

"I'll proofread what you've done," she said, taking up the crisp white sheets. "That will save time and suit us both, won't it, Susan?" She showed her fillings again and sat informally on a table. Susan Cox went on typing. My God, what a slave driver, she thought. No wonder your bloody children fled the nest. If that letter in the paper was anything to go by, they were nothing but unpaid labor. More like the cotton plantations of old Virginia than a home.

"Well, the first page will have to be done again, for a start," said Virginia, coolly swinging her heels as she read on.

Susan typed a whole line in capitals.

At a quarter to nine, it was at last finished. Virginia took her script up to her room, closed the window, put her coat around her shoulders, locked her office door, and marched along the grey-linoleum corridor floor. Home, bath, straight to bed, with the alarm on to wake her at three. What a time to catch a plane. Still, Virginia prided herself on her ability to keep up with a demanding schedule. A Professional Woman had to be able to in this day and age. She walked toward the stairs, then changed her mind and went to the lift. It was an awful lift. Virginia hated enclosed spaces of any kind, and if someone pressed the button for this one just before it got to the third floor it jammed. Luckily, there was nobody much around. And it would save a couple of minutes.

Mrs. Makowski and Mrs. O'Hare stood jawing by the lift as Susan Cox came out of the office and locked it.

"Through at last?" they said sympathetically. "She ought to be skinned alive, that one."

"I've missed the showing," said Susan miserably. "The party doesn't start till ten. I suppose I'll just go home and put my glad rags on. I feel like death."

The lift light showed at the sixth floor and the machinery began making little coughing noises, preparatory to starting. As it descended, Virginia McBride saw through the slit in the door the three women around the lift shaft, and they saw her. On an impulse, Mrs. O'Hare strode forward and, judging her moment precisely, pressed

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the button just as the lift was approaching the third floor. They heard it stop suddenly with a jerk.

"Oh, my God," said Susan. "You shouldn't have done that. She gets claustrophobia."

"I know," said Mrs. O'Hare.

Little stuttering noises came from the lift shaft.

"She's pressing the emergency button," said Mrs. Makowski.

"She treats me like dirt," said Susan from nothing. "And I am not dirt."

"We're none of us her dirt," said Mrs. O'Hare. "The caretaker's off sick until Monday."

"She'll get hysterical," said Susan. "She always does, even if the building's full of people." To confirm her words, shouting started coming from the shaft.

"It's that claustrophobia thing," said Mrs. O'Hare, nodding her head grimly.

There came another shout, and another, then suddenly a howl, half human, grotesque, followed by another till it became continuous. The little shaft echoed with cries and sobs and moans rising to a hideous intensity.

"Did you say till Monday?" asked Mrs. Makowski.

"That's right," said Mrs. O'Hare. "It's his arthritis. We're the last ones in the building."

They stood around, the little group of women, listening to the animal sounds of terror and rage coming from the lift shaft.

"I could do with a cup of tea," said Mrs. Makowski.

"Tea?" said Susan. "That's an awfully typical woman's drink, don't you think? I could do with something stronger."

"She keeps a bottle of bourbon in her room," said Mrs. Makowski.

"Kept," said Susan.

"Come on, sisters," said Mrs. O'Hare, waving her skeleton key. "Let's go have us a slug."

"Q"

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Brendan DuBois

Money Is Something Else

The morning sun had burned off most of the fog and Dennis Avery had no problem keeping an eye on Thurman Drake's house. He was in a fairly poor section of a neighborhood in Porter, as far as poor could go, and his Volkswagen Rabbit was parked near the end of Murphy Street, where it hooked up with Union Street. Thurman's home was a two-story, two-apartment duplex. It was early summer and the front lawn of the blue house was a pounded grey-green of dirt and dying grass. A rusted car set up on blocks was parked permanently in front of the house and a Ford Escort was in the driveway.

Dennis yawned—he had gotten up at four that morning—and he shifted in his seat, keeping an eye on Thurman's house from the rearview mirror.

The car seat was set back far enough so he could stretch out, his head and body hidden almost entirely from view, his long legs stretched almost to a comfortable position. He checked his watch. Nine in the morning. Four hours ago, he had driven here and parked his car and adjusted the side and rearview mirrors so he had Thurman's house and yard entirely in view. It was a good setup. Some investigators screwed everything by being blatant, parking directly across the street from a claimant's house, sticking a camera out and practically sending up fireworks with the message, Hey, Buddy, You're Being Watched. Dennis didn't do that. He was good. He smiled at the thought.

There was the noise from a small engine as a mail truck came into view up the street. All the houses on Murphy Street were run down, the paint peeling away and the porches splintering and cracking. About a mile away in the port section of Porter, there were condos and brick sidewalks and chocolate-chip-cookie boutiques. A lot of money floated around there, and a lot of Mercedes and BMWs, but none of it had reached Murphy Street. That part of town could have been a hundred miles away.

The mail truck stopped at the sagging grey mailbox at Thurman's house and Dennis saw a faint shadow as the mailman dropped off

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some mail. In Dennis's lap was a yellow legal pad on which he wrote: 0906. Mailman delivered mail to clmt's home.

The truck puttered away and in the rearview mirror Dennis saw Thurman come out of the house, limping and leaning on a cane, wearing jeans and a torn white T-shirt, but no shoes. His hair was long, black, and tangled, as was his beard. On the pad Dennis wrote: 0907. Clmt left house, utilizing cane. Mackey liked good notes and would scream if he didn't get them.

Thurman walked slowly past his white Ford Escort, the cane tight in his right hand, to the mailbox, opening it with his left hand. Dennis swiveled in his seat and, picking up his 35-mm camera with motor drive and zoom lens from the floor, he snapped off five shots of Thurman as he slowly limped back into the house, the camera going whir-whir-whir, and then put the camera back down on the floor and wrote: 0911. Clmt retrieved mail, returned to house.

His back started to ache and he tried to stretch his arms to make something pop back there but nothing happened. What a way to make a living.

A year ago, Dennis had been a police dispatcher with the department in Porter, just two years after graduating from high school with a diploma and not much else. He had hated books and hated classes, so he knew he couldn't handle college. He had drifted around and got the dispatch job, and after a while he had liked it, boring as it was—answering phones, filing papers, getting coffee for the cops, all of whom treated him like a moron. But the money was something else. He made six bucks an hour, with a quarter-an-hour increase every year if he was lucky. He lived alone in a two-room apartment above a grocery store in a noisy part of town, where kids hung out at the street corners, playing their radios, smashing beer bottles against the bricks and concrete. Every six weeks his shift would change, and every time he got used to going to work at eleven at night or having breakfast at noontime he would have to switch again. His car had muffler problems and he never seemed to have enough spending money. At nights he'd wake up, listening to the traffic outside and the kids laughing and he'd think, How long can this go on?

One of the dispatchers was an old guy named Freddy. Freddy had been with the department for fifteen years. He knew every street in Porter, every alleyway and nearly every streetlight. At lunch he'd eat a cold can of ravioli straight out of the can with a spoon. Every

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half hour he'd go into the john, carrying a portable radio with him so he could handle the traffic.

Freddy scared Dennis to death.

Then one night Mackey showed up, an ex-cop who still knew most of the guys in the department. Mackey had a moustache and wore a three-piece suit and heavy cologne. His blond hair was perfectly trimmed and blow-dried. He liked to laugh and slap the cops on the back as if he was still good buddies with them and the world. Dennis knew most of the cops thought Mackey was a pain in the rear, but he had money and his own business—an investigation agency for banks and insurance companies. And on that night Mackey stopped by he'd chatted with Dennis and then said, "I need an investigator. Are you interested?"

Dennis felt light-headed, like the air was slowly leaving the dispatch room.

"Maybe."

"How much you make now?"

The question rankled. "None of your business."

Mackey laughed and Dennis saw he was slightly bucktooth. "Kid, I'm still friends with Kim. Good friends. She showed me your payroll. You make six an hour, right?"

Dennis nodded.

"I need someone in two weeks. Eight bucks an hour. It's yours if you want it, but you got to tell me tonight."

As Dennis looked around the dispatch room, the phone rang and it was Mr. Kosten again, complaining about the mad Albanians who were planning to blow up his house. When he hung up, Dennis looked at Mackey. "You got it," he said.

Most of the cops didn't care if he stayed or left, but one—a shift sergeant who was friendlier than the others—shook his head and said, "Bad move, kid. You're burning your bridges here, and Mackey'll chew you up and spit you out. Good luck, though."

Dennis shifted in the seat again. When he was done here, he'd go home and work out the kinks in his back. He knew he should have a doctor look at it but there was a problem with that. He couldn't afford it, because he'd been dumb enough to leave the cops. He was now making eight bucks an hour, eighty dollars more a week, but taxes took a big chunk out of that and he also didn't have the health, dental, and life insurance the cops had provided. (Mackey: "This is a business, kid, not a welfare office.")

With the cops, too, he'd had a regular eight-hour shift. Now he

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worked whenever Mackey told him to. And Mackey was a tightwad, screaming at him in front of everybody in the office for making a long-distance phone call while he himself always went out to lunch in his BMW to the best restaurants in Devon and Porter. (Mackey: "It's my business, my money. You don't like it—tough.") Tough was right, Dennis thought. He checked the mirrors again. A green pickup truck passed the house. 0934. Green truck passes house.

Most of Mackey's business came from insurance companies who were paying out big bucks every week in worker-compensation cases. In this state, when a worker claimed he was injured on the job, he got a large percentage of his weekly wage, tax free, and for the right fee it wasn't hard to find a doctor who would say you couldn't work again. So Dennis and the other investigators went out to the houses, apartment buildings, and mobile homes where these cases lived armed with 35-mm cameras, hoping to catch Mr. Harrison, with the disabling back injury, bend over and pick up a fifty-pound sack of fertilizer, or Mrs. Green, with the hurt wrist, practice her golf stroke out in the back yard, or Mr. Carr, with the totally disabled knee, jogging with his girl friend.

A lot of waiting. A lot of film used up, accompanied by the whine of the camera's motor drive. Months later at the Labor Department hearings, the pictures would be brandished like trophies and these people would lose their benefits. The insurance companies would save their money and gleefully pay their bills to Mackey, so he could have lobster for lunch twice a week and pay Dennis eight bucks an hour.

A young blonde girl carrying a grocery bag walked by Thurman's house. 0952. Girl with grocery bag walks by clmt's house.

Thurman was just another deadbeat, another claimant. On the seat next to Dennis, with his brown-bag lunch (Wise chips, can of warm Coke, and a ham-and-cheese sandwich), was Thurman's file. Thurman had been working as a general laborer at the big power plant in Newbrook, where he claimed he had slipped and injured his back. There were only two witnesses to the accident—his younger brother Dick and a man named Neil Patrickson. In doing the normal background check before going out on the street, Dennis learned that Neil Patrickson was Thurman's cousin. The insurance company had loved that info and had ordered a full surveillance. "Come up with something you can nail the son of a bitch for," Mackey had shouted. "Get a picture of him changing a tire, painting his house, planting a tree, I don't care what. Just get it."

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Dennis yawned again. He had been watching Thurman for five days now and nothing had happened. The first day he had borrowed the company van and on other days he had hidden himself in the woods across the street, camera on a tripod, mounted and ready to go. But Thurman only left once a day to get his mail. That was it.

Dennis cracked his knuckles, tapped the steering wheel, and thought, God, could this be a first—an honest claimant? Maybe Thurman really had fallen down. But something about Thurman made Dennis tremble. In the man's file was an ID picture, taken at the Newbrook plant, and Thurman's beard and hair looked wiry, as if they were made from some awful electrical tape, and his eyes were dull and mean, as if Thurman had seen some awful things and was no longer bothered by anything. In doing his background check, Dennis had also discovered that Thurman had a criminal record. One store robbery six years back and a couple of B & Es. That and the connection with his brother and the cousin made Dennis believe he was faking it. But why was he being so careful?

Another hour passed. Dennis ate the chips. He started tapping a rhythm on the steering wheel, trying to remember the lyrics of a popular song he had heard earlier this morning. Some of the investigators brought books to read or crossword puzzles, and one woman had a tiny television set that plugged into the cigarette lighter, but he couldn't do that. He needed to concentrate totally on the job at hand. A few weeks ago, Mackey, screaming and yelling, had tossed one investigator out of the office because he had lost a claimant while he was reading. Dennis wasn't going to make the same mistake.

He looked up and saw the hunched-over figure of Thurman, cane in his left hand, as he stepped out of the house and went to his Escort. Dennis sat up in his seat. This was a first. Ever since the accident, Thurman hadn't taken his car out. Dennis wrote it down. 1104. Clmt enters Escort, N.H. reg, leaves driveway. The Escort roared by, stopping at the intersection and then taking a right onto Union Street. Dennis set the legal pad aside, started up the Rabbit, headed toward the same intersection, and turned right.

Thurman was up to something, that was for sure, but what? A meeting with a girl? A part-time job for some more money? Or was he just getting a six-pack of beer? Something nagged at Dennis as he followed the Escort. He took his time, not following too closely. Patience was one thing Mackey preached. "You gotta have patience out there, whether you're following them or waiting for them to

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come out of their house. You don't use patience in this business, you're going to fall on your butt."

Fall. In all the pictures Dennis had seen, Thurman used the cane in his right hand. But he had come out to the Escort a few minutes ago with the cane in his left hand!

Dennis stopped at a traffic light, a car length behind the Escort, and rolled down his window and leaned out. The man driving the Escort looked into the sideview mirror for a moment and Dennis saw his eyes, bright eyes full of life. The driver wasn't Thurman at all. It was his younger brother. The distance had fooled him. *Damn* it. Dennis cursed and pulled a U-turn over a traffic barrier, horns honking and blaring at him, and drove back to Murphy Street, passing cars left and right, imagining the screaming fit Mackey would have if he found out he had lost Thurman. He rounded the corner and there was his man, getting into the passenger side of a blue pickup truck, walking straight and true, with no cane in his hand, left or right.

Now the chase really begins, Dennis thought.

The pickup truck was being driven by Thurman's cousin, Neil Patrickson. They went out of Porter and headed south, into Massachusetts, on the Interstate. Dennis followed, keeping enough distance behind and weaving in and out of traffic so that he wasn't a good target. But he had that warm feeling that he was doing all right, that he hadn't been made. These guys didn't know he was behind them. It was almost noon now, but he wasn't hungry for his ham-and-cheese. He was feeding off something else more important than food. As much as he disliked Mackey and much else about the job, he did like the chase, and the secret feeling of taking the pictures and following the claimants and seeing what they did.

The truck took an exit at Rowley, Massachusetts, an Oldsmobile followed the truck, and Dennis followed behind the Olds, keeping the truck in view.

In Rowley he found it harder to keep a good distance behind, but then the truck pulled into the parking lot of a small shopping plaza and he slid his Volkswagen into a line of parked cars. In the plaza were a clothing store, a bank, a liquor store, and a Friendly's ice-cream parlor, along with a Market Basket grocery store. All this time and trouble and all they're going to do is shop, Dennis thought, irritated. He would be able to get pictures of Thurman walking without a cane, but that wouldn't be worth much. Thurman's doctor

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could always claim he had a momentary improvement or something like that—not good enough to make the nut. Unless Thurman came out of one of the stores carrying a television set or something. Dennis eased the Rabbit through another line of parked cars and watched as the pickup truck stopped in the fire lane in front of the store complex. Probably dropping off Thurman, he thought, as he got his camera ready.

Through the viewfinder, he watched as the passenger door swung open and Thurman stepped out. Whir-whir. Thurman pulled on a ski mask. Whir-whir. Thurman reached back inside the truck, took out a shotgun, and ran into the bank. Whir-whir. My God, he thought, keeping his finger on the shutter. He tried to keep his hands steady, but they shook as he took pictures of Thurman running out of the bank, the shotgun held high in one hand, a large canvas bag in another, and the pickup truck roared out of the parking lot, raising a cloud of dust and exhaust, its tires screeching. Then Dennis put the camera down on the seat next to him and looked at his keys dangling from the ignition. He should reach over and start the car but his hands were doing funny things. Without much thought, he raised himself up and sat down on his hands until the shaking went away.

He was one of three people at the office the next day. Linda, the secretary, an overweight woman with bleached hair and impossibly long red fingernails, was in the outer office. She answered the phones and told everyone in a loud voice about her latest boy friend. ("You wouldn't *believe* how well built he is!") Mackey was in his private office with a view of Porter harbor. And Dennis was in the investigators' office, a windowless room equipped with two desks for four people. A closet on one side held the surveillance gear—cameras, tripods, radios, a makeup kit, lenses, and sound recorders. Dennis was at the desk closest to Mackey's office. At his elbow were the pictures from yesterday. Mackey used a computerized film-processing service to develop film overnight. Except for three blurry shots, the pictures had come out well. He had nailed Thurman Drake at the bank robbery. He thought of calling the police, but something told him to wait. In the typewriter was a daily log form, on which he was supposed to be typing the notes from his pad from the prior day's surveillance.

The inner-office door opened and there was Mackey in his vest,

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his suitcoat off. He waved a finger at Dennis. "C'mere, Dennis, will you?"

Mackey's office was well furnished, with leather-covered chairs and a heavy oak desk. He didn't offer a chair and Dennis remained standing. There was a telescope on a tripod near the large window and on the walls were framed prints of sailing ships. Mackey professed a love for the sea, but Dennis remembered one of the Porter cops telling him that Mackey had only been out on a boat twice and both times he had gotten seasick. Looking closely at Mackey now, he marveled at how much alike he and Mackey were physically. From a hundred feet away, he supposed they would look almost like twins, or at least brothers.

Mackey tapped his finger on a sheet of paper on his desk. "Dennis, what's this?"

"That's my expense voucher for last week."

"I didn't ask you that," Mackey said, his face becoming bright red. "I asked you what this was." He tapped his finger on the paper again. "This eight dollars for a meal on the twelfth."

Dennis thought for a moment, remembering a 24-hour surveillance a company wanted for a claimant up in Dorchester. He had packed a bag lunch but by late that night he had needed a hot meal.

"That was the twenty-four-hour Dunn surveillance."

Mackey crumpled up the voucher into a ball and tossed it into the wastebasket.

"I don't care if it was a surveillance for His Holiness. You don't get compensated for meals, ever."

"Mack, it was a—"

"Did you hear me? Ever. Now what's up with that Thurman surveillance?"

Dennis paused and stared out the window as a sailboat, its white sails bright in the sunlight, moved calmly out of the harbor. He wished he was on that boat. "Nothing. Nothing's going on with the Thurman case. He stayed home all day yesterday."

"All right, go back there tonight. If he's not around during the day, he must be doing something at night."

Back at his desk, Dennis typed up the report, pounding the keys with a hard, two-finger style, and then he rummaged in the supply closet before heading home. He had a lot to do, and patience would help. As he passed Linda, he saw the paper she was reading. The headline said that $200,000 had been stolen in the bank robbery in Rowley . . .

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At eleven o'clock that night, he was in a phone booth near the waterfront at Porter. He liked the smell of the salt air, the sounds of the seagulls and the diesel engines, and watching the sailboats, tugs, and freighters that moved in and out of the harbor with such seeming ease. He picked through the soggy phonebook until he found the number he wanted, then he counted out five dimes, placed them on the scratched metal counter, and started dialing.

The phone was answered on the seventh ring. "Who the hell is this?"

"Thurman?"

"Yeah?"

"Thurman, I saw you."

He hung up and looked at his watch—11:05. Out on the harbor, there was the wail of a siren and then the bridge connecting Porter with Kittery on the other side of the harbor started to rise in the middle. Traffic on both sides of the bridge was halted and Dennis felt warm and content as a freighter steamed out, its running lights bright and soft. *The Zinc Master*, home port of Lagos. He wondered where Lagos was. Then he dialed again. The phone was answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Thurman, this is *Candid Camera* calling, and you would not believe the pictures I have of a certain pickup truck and a certain resident of Murphy Street, Porter, New Hampshire, wearing a ski mask and carrying what the cops love to call a dangerous weapon."

Thurman started screaming something into the phone but Dennis hung up again. This time he waited ten minutes before calling back.

"Me again," he said.

The swearing resumed.

"I don't like foul language," Dennis said and hung up.

On the fourth call, Thurman kept his voice steady. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Twenty grand. Ten percent."

"You're crazy."

"No, I'm good—and I got the photos to prove it. You're not too bright, Thurman. You should have known the insurance company would be keeping a tail on you, and your brother didn't do a very good job of screwing me up. Sorry about that."

Thurman was breathing heavily. "No way."

"Then I go to the cops. How do you like that?"

"How can I trust you not to take the money and call the cops?"

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"You can't. You'll have to rely on my good faith. If you can't rely on that, you can rely on my promise to go to the cops with everything. I'm tired, Thurman, this is way past my bedtime. I'll see you tomorrow night at the Depot Cafe at ten P.M. I'll be in the rear booth, wearing a three-piece suit. Be there with the twenty grand and you'll get the pictures."

He hung up the phone and walked out of the booth, heading for the waterfront, where the lights reflected off the water seemed to promise him something.

He was at the booth at the Depot Cafe the next night as promised. The Depot was a small restaurant in the center of Porter, with back booths that hugged one wall and a front area with long tables. He had a piece of custard pie while he waited. The pie was cold and made his teeth ache. He wore the only suit he owned.

On the tables in the other booths, candles flickered in the dim light. He had blown out the candle in his own booth and it was now so dark he couldn't read the menu. On the seat at his side was an envelope and as he waited his hands perspired and his upper lip itched.

At 10:00 on the dot Thurman came in, wearing jeans and a denim jacket, a gym bag in his hand. He came to the booth and sat down, glaring at Dennis in the dim light.

Dennis raised a hand. "Let's cut the preliminaries, all right? I know I'm not your favorite person in the world right now but we have a business arrangement to work out. Just so there's no mistake, here's a sample of what I have."

He reached into the envelope at his side and tossed a small glossy photo across the booth. Thurman picked it up with both hands, held it up to the light, and sagged a bit. "I thought you were screwing with me last night," he said, his voice low.

"Let me see what *you* have, then."

Thurman slid the gym bag over and Dennis picked it up and placed it on the seat beside him. Lighting a match, he examined the bundles of bills in the bottom of the bag. Finally, he slid the envelope across to Thurman, who ripped it open and started leafing through the pictures. He looked up, his eyes dark and hard.

"There's no negatives."

"That's right."

"You—"

"Listen, Thurman. I deal with insurance matters every day, and

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I'm putting out a policy of my own right now. Not that I don't trust you, but I'd sure hate to walk out the door here now and have my head blown off by your cousin."

"Go on."

"So here's *my* insurance. A friend of mine has the negatives in an envelope at home. He doesn't know what's in it. All he does know is that if something goes wrong, if something should happen to me—anything at all, a car accident, a piece of concrete hitting me or a bullet through my head—the envelope goes to the State Police. It also goes to them if there's not enough money in this here bag. This friend is young and in good health. He's going to keep those negatives for as long as he lives, and he's likely to live a long time."

Thurman was staring at the pictures clenched in his massive fists. "What's *my* insurance?" he demanded. "What's going to keep you from going to the cops and giving them the negatives anytime down the line?"

Dennis smiled and pulled a business card from the vest pocket of his suit. "Here's my card, Thurman. I've been working in Porter for some years and expect I'll be here for some years yet. You have any problems, my business and home address are on that card. Come see me."

Thurman put the card into his jacket pocket. "Okay, mister, here's my guarantee. You won't get any problems, much as I'd like to clip you, but if anything happens to me or my cousin, arrests or anything, *my* friends will have this card and you can count on a visit some night when you think you're safe and sleeping—and I guarantee you won't wake up."

Dennis held out his hand. "Sounds fair to me."

The next day another envelope came to Dennis from the processing lab. Another set of bank-robbery pictures, and he went for a short drive to another part of Porter.

The police detective had been a sergeant when Dennis was a dispatcher. He leafed through the pictures, shaking his head at each one. "Unbelievable," he said. He was wearing slacks, a white polo shirt, and a dark-brown-leather shoulder holster.

"Unbelievable," he repeated. Then he piled them up and put them on his desk and stared at Dennis. "The Rowley cops and the State Police down there are going to love these, Dennis, but I want to know something. Why did you wait a couple of days before coming forward with them? It could hurt the investigation."

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Dennis shrugged. "I was kind of scared. Then I decided I had to do the right thing."

The detective looked skeptical. "The ten-thousand reward the bank just announced for information didn't have anything to do with it, did it?"

"Not at all," Dennis said, his face calm.

The detective shook his head and picked up some papers, as if he was dismissing him. "For some reason I can't believe you."

"You don't have to," Dennis told him.

He went directly into Mackey's office. Mack was dictating something into his recorder and all Dennis said was, "Mack, I'm quitting. You're an idiot to work for."

The face got red again. "Go ahead. I was ready to fire you, anyway. I hope you have fun out in the streets."

When he got to the door, Dennis said in a sincere voice, "I hope you have fun, too."

He decided in the end to drive to Florida, the land where the sun was almost always bright and warm, and the winters were mild and fun. He kept the gas tank full as he headed south out of New Hampshire and into Massachusetts and through New York State. He had never felt so alive. In one suitcase in the trunk was the twenty thousand he had gotten from Thurman and in another was the ten thousand he had gotten from the bank. On to Florida, get rid of the Rabbit, lie low, and decide what to do. As he crossed the border into New York, he groped on the floor and pulled up a small paper bag, which he tossed out the window into some trees.

In the bag was the fake moustache and false teeth he had worn that night in the Depot Cafe, along with his three-piece suit. He smiled at the memory, knowing that Thurman and his cousin were now in jail, and that their friends were busy with Mackey's business card, planning and plotting how to take care of him.

Florida. Whatever he decided there, he knew he would never go back to investigative work. He didn't have the patience for it.

"Q"

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Campbell Geeslin

Home Grown

Travis Shaw worked as the chief copywriter at Elnod, Winters & Cuneo, a New York advertising agency that couldn't afford an office on Madison Avenue. The company was located on lower Fifth Avenue, a street that looked nice on the letterhead.

Travis spent his days writing catchy one-liners about catsup that emphasized its easy-pouring qualities; about a new dishwashing liquid that "smells like the sun on a spring morning"; a photographic developing firm that made two prints for the price of one; and three or four less important clients. He often referred to these smaller customers as his "no accounts," but only to his wife Lori.

The Shaws had a daughter who married at seventeen and moved to New Mexico. This left Lori Shaw at loose ends for a few months until she discovered crafts.

The first one to catch her fancy was macrame. She made slings for pots of ferns and hung them out on the enclosed porch. She hung cooking vessels from red-braided ropes on hooks in the kitchen ceiling. She wove belts for herself that tied on the hip with long dangling fringe and wooden beads that bounced against her thigh.

The first thing Travis did when he got home each evening was make himself a drink, although the doctor told him it was bad for his condition. Travis had gout. There were needles in his left toe, and by the end of the day the pain had taken over his whole consciousness. Even his teeth seemed to hurt.

He had found that a substantial slug of bourbon let him get a little distance from the pain, especially when it was combined with his nightly ritual of settling down in front of the TV set with his left foot at rest on an old pillow, not too soft and not too hard.

When Lori ran out of macrame projects, she discovered stenciling. She bought tin trays and wooden recipe boxes and covered them with painted fruit and flowers.

She climbed on a ladder and stenciled a green ivy pattern around the top of the porch paneling, just below the molding. She thought this looked so nice that she painted the porch floor a pale green and added a border in pink daisies all around the baseboard.

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Then she stenciled a row of violets around the bedside tables. She was constantly on the lookout for more surfaces to be decorated. "How do you think it would look if I put a row of white swans around the coffee table?" she asked one morning while she was driving Travis to the station.

"I thought you said that table was a genuine Duncan Phyfe and it belonged to your grandmother."

"But I've got this swan cutout that would make a perfect border on something."

"I don't think either Phyfe or your grandmother ever intended that any paint be applied to that polished mahogany, Lori. Why don't you put the swans on the hamper in the bathroom?"

"It's already white. —Oh, Travis! That's a wonderful idea! I'll have to paint it first, of course."

Travis admired Lori's energy. After the stenciling, she went into a rug-hooking phase that produced colorful death traps in hallways and on the stair landings.

Travis finally suggested she try working as a volunteer at the hospital or taking on some other worthwhile community project. "You majored in English," he said one night during a commercial on the TV news program. "You could teach English to some poor kid who's struggling with the language." His toe throbbed suddenly and he winced.

"No," she said firmly. "All my life I've had this need to express my artistic urges, and that's what I'm doing. Don't you like my rugs?"

"We have ovals and round ones and square ones and rectangles—"

"And don't forget the rug in the kitchen that looks like a watermelon slice."

"We're about to run out of floor, Lori."

"Well, I'm thinking I'll try a little needlework next. I haven't really done anything like that since I made a sampler for my mother when I was eight or nine. Maybe I'll take up something like that next."

Travis thought that needlework sounded harmless enough, and at first it was. It was only much later that it brought on a final, unpremeditated act of violence.

One evening while Travis was fixing his pre-dinner bourbon (lots of ice, a splash of water), Lori came out of the pantry. "Ta ta!" she

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said with her arms outspread, doing a model's turn. "How do you like it?"

Lori was showing off a new apron. She had embroidered in bright-blue thread on a green background *Kiss the Cook.* "You can wear this if you ever decide to help with the dishes or anything," she said.

"I get it," Travis said. He didn't ask where his wife got the message, but he had a feeling it had been thought up by some poor copywriting slave like himself.

Weeks later, Travis was resting his whiskey-numbed foot on its pillow when Lori tossed a dishtowel to him. She had been running the dishwasher. "How about clearing out the dishes and putting the silver away tonight?" she asked.

Travis groaned.

"Look at that towel I just finished today."

Travis held it up. She had embroidered on the cloth in thick cross-stitched letters *This Is an Equal Opportunity Kitchen.*

Her next project was a needlepoint case for her trowel. It had rosebuds and a long message: *For Every Garden a Flower, for Every Life a Dream.*

On his forty-third birthday (the gout was particularly bad that day), Lori gave Travis a large package before he limped off to the office. "Open it," she insisted. Her eyes were sparkling.

Inside the box, wrapped in tissue, was a big needlepoint envelope. "Oh," Travis said, "what a lot of work." He had no idea what it was for, and his puzzlement showed.

"It's to carry your briefcase in," Lori said triumphantly.

"Ah," he said. On one side was a little red auto. On the other were the words: *I Owe, I Owe, So Off to Work I Go.*

She insisted he use the case that very morning. At the station, he quickly put his newspaper around it so none of his fellow commuters could see it.

Lori thought his briefcase cover was so handsome that she made herself a large shopping bag of canvas and stitched a big red heart on one side. On the other, she embroidered in flowing script *Busy Hands Make Happy Hearts.*

Then she made a cover for the toaster with the cross-stitched message *Home Is Where the Heart Is.* There was a little green house on the opposite side.

One cold night when Travis came home, his gout seemed especially

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bad. The catsup client had been threatening to leave the agency and dishwashing liquid was getting restless. Travis knew the signs.

He gave his glass an extra quarter inch of bourbon, packed in the ice, and squirted in a bit of water. He limped to the TV set, turned it on, and settled into his chair.

He eased his left foot out of his shoe and looked around. His pillow was missing. "Lori! Where's my pillow?"

She had been waiting for just this moment, and she made an entrance, pillow in hand.

"Here we are!" she said brightly. But it wasn't his old familiar pillow she was presenting so ceremoniously. "I made a new cover in needlepoint just for you," she said. The background was black. In red and orange letters was the message *Happiness Is Home Grown*. "Here, let me put it under your poor foot," she said.

"Ow!" Travis cried as she touched his ankle. "It's bad tonight. Just put the pillow down and I'll put my foot on top."

"Doesn't this look nicer than that raggedy old cotton cover?" she asked.

Travis lowered his heel carefully onto the pillow. "It's made of cardboard."

"Nonsense. It's the finest lamb's-wool needlepoint thread. It couldn't be softer."

Tears came into Travis's eyes. All evening he tried to get his foot settled comfortably into the new pillow. The pain was so bad that not even a second large bourbon seemed to help.

Lori's feelings were hurt. She had spent weeks on the pillow cover and she thought it improved the appearance of their living room enormously. She went off upstairs to pout. Travis sat brooding through comedies and car chases and the late movie, scarcely aware of what was on the screen. His gout was worse than ever.

Finally, he stood, picked up the pillow, and pulled himself upstairs by the handrail, trying to keep his weight off his throbbing foot.

He could see from the light in the upstairs hallway that Lori was asleep. He had to be careful to keep from slipping on one of her hooked rugs. He decided he would wake her and ask her to take the cover off this pillow and give him back the only thing that provided any ease from his constant pain.

Lori sighed softly, and in an instant he had the pillow over her face. He pressed it firmly, suddenly hard, with all his weight, shutting off any air that might have gotten to her nose or mouth. He held the pillow down until she was absolutely still.

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Jane Bosworth

Suite 201

"Genny O'Thompson,
So bold and defiant,
Brought tears to the eyes of a giant.
"T'was you those tears hurt,
Me lad so reliant,
For to you that man was Prince Valiant."

Thompson, me inner voice tasted the man's name, savored it until images of him kaleidoscoped through me mind. I saw the muscle-bound giant of me youth plucking me outa the Flower Children and setting me to work the docks until me hands bled and me muscles screamed in protest—until he'd molded a self-destructive pothead into a man. Then he set me free to drift in life until I found me own niche. I never dreamed I'd be using that niche to find the daughter I never even knew he had.

So the old man's got a daughter, I remember thinking that day in me office. Who would ever a thought a bloke like him would—

"You got to find 'er, Keith," Thompson's voice interrupted me thoughts. "I've rung up the police, 'er landlady, even 'er boss. They all say the same things: 'What are you worried about? She ain't been gone a week. She'll come 'ome when she's ready.'

"They say she's got a boy friend. A drifter. A bum what takes off whenever 'e feels like it. They say she's with 'im. But it ain't like me Genny not to write me every day."

I seen pain drift onto his face and it made me gut quiver. "Something's wrong," he said. "I can feel it in me gut, Keith. She's headstrong and defiant, me Genny is; but she ain't cruel. She wouldn't let me worry like this. Not if she could 'elp it."

"You never told me you'd been married."

The pain on his face melted into anger. "Old Thompson 'ere—" he thumbed the words into his chest "—weren't good enough for the likes of Rosey McGrady, me Genny's mum. No. 'E was good enough for a laugh or two so long as 'e was buying the pints, and 'e was good enough for a romp in the sack. But 'e wasn't educated enough,

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or rich enough, or cultured enough for Rosey. She 'ad me Genny, but she wouldn't 'ave me."

Tears welling in his eyes wrenched at me heart. Thompson was the closest I ever come to having a loving dad.

"I asked 'er to marry me—begged 'er, for Genny's sake," he continued. "And she laughed at me."

He was unashamedly crying and I was jealous of that openness. I could never let meself go that much. Never feel for anyone that much. Never be so open with meself. Thompson, big dumb Thompson was still everything Keith Jenkins longed to be but never could.

"I got me some notes saved," he said and pulled a wad from his pocket. He forced it into me hand. "For expenses," he said. "To 'elp you find me Genny."

I wanted to tell him to keep his bloody notes because I owed him, really owed him. But I was down to me last notes again. Without that money, I couldn't afford to go off to London.

I made meself a vow to pay him back some day and pocketed his money. I caught the next flight out of Auckland for England and arrived a day later with the setting sun.

Me hunt began at Genny's basement flat in Kensington. When me knocks on her door went unanswered, I picked the lock and let meself into a single room that had been tunneled into the earth beneath the inn, cemented over, and painted white. The clicking of me heels on the bare cement floor echoed off the rounded walls. I rubbed the cold off me hands.

It's like a bloody tomb in here, me inner voice said.

I turned on the light and stared at the decrepit four-poster bed that dominated the flat. Each of its four posts was topped with a ridiculous upside-down pine cone. Its covers only accented the sinkhole centered in its mattress.

Beside the bed was a cup-stained vanity from the Great War era. Someone had taped a photograph over a spider web of cracks in the upper right corner of its mirror. I peeled the picture free and looked at it. Genny and a shirtless muscle man stared up at meself from within the picture. I turned it over in me hand and read the inscription on its back.

"Johnathan and me," it read. "Transit workers picnic."

I pocketed the picture.

A search of the vanity's drawers turned out an antique long-bowed key with the number 201 stamped on its crown. Someone had

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wrapped the shaft with paper and then taped the paper in place. I peeled the paper free and opened it up. A rough masculine hand had scrawled "Number 33. St. James's Place" on it. I put the key and the message inside me shirt pocket and turned toward the bed.

It defied me, that bed did. Like a stubborn old man, it refused to divulge any secrets. I removed the covers, upturned the mattresses, even turned out the pillows from their cases.

Nothing.

Then something drew me eye to those ridiculous upside-down pine cones atop the posts. I grabbed the nearest one and twisted it free. There was a hollow compartment inside the post and at the base of the compartment was a blue pendant sitting on a cushion of gold chain. I removed it.

The pendant stone was iceberg-blue, about two inches long, and tear-shaped. It was capped with delicate gold leaves that stemmed upward into a loop through which the chain passed. Inside that stone, with its wings outstretched in effortless flight, was a tiny yellow butterfly. So real it looked—so alive—that I caught the stone in me fist lest the insect escape. The stone was warm, almost oily, to the touch. I stared at it.

How could a butterfly get inside a stone? I asked meself.

Not stone, ratbag—amber, me inner voice chided. It's a bloody blob of resin what fell from a conifer centuries ago. On its way to the ground it nabbed the butterfly.

I looked at the pure blueness of it, at the butterfly captured for eternity inside, and I understood why the early Romans equated amber with immortality. Here in me hand was an image of life preserved forever in stone. I wrapped the pendant inside me handkerchief and put it in me pocket.

Was it Genny who hid the pendant? I wondered. Or had it been there for a hundred years?

Questions. Unanswered questions raced through me mind. The flat would yield me no answers, so I decided to try me luck at 33 St. James's Place.

Number 33 was a magnificent Georgian town home on the corner of St. James's Place and Charles II Street. Its columned main entrance faced St. James's Square, where flood lights brought into view the equestered statue of a man whose bronze flesh couldn't feel the chill of the night. I walked up the stairs to Number 33 and stood in the porch light before a heavy oak door. A bronze plaque beside

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it read St. Edwards Funeral Parlor. A sign on the door bid me enter, so I did.

A bell somewhere deep inside the building announced meself, and as I turned right into a parlor I heard footsteps coming me way. I had entered a room overseen by the gigantic portrait of a white-haired gentleman in a black suit and tie. *James Edward Vickers* it was titled. To the right of the portrait was a rack of keys matching the one in me pocket. The rustle of fabric drew me round to face a frumpy matron dressed in funeral black. Her eyes questioned me reason for being here.

"Two oh one—" the words fell off me tongue.

"Occupied," she said. "By James Edward Vickers hisself. Fitting it is too, that 'e be there. Suite 201 was his greatest success, don't you know. Why, ever since it opened the year of 'Er Majesty's Silver Jubilee we've never 'ad it empty. We've 'ad everything from sheiks to royalty to union bosses in 201. Privacy is what they pay for and privacy is what they get."

She punctuated her statements by crossing her arms in a way that challenged me to contradict her.

"I take it Mr. Vickers is dead," I said.

" 'Course 'e's dead," she snapped. "Everybody in this whole bloody 'ouse is dead 'cept for meself and young Doctor Firth, who certifies the cause of death for them what do their final resting 'ere. Now, just what is it you'd be wanting?"

I dug the picture of Genny and her muscle man out of me pocket, handed it to her, and watched recognition deepen the wrinkles on her brow. She handed it back.

" 'E was a cruel man, 'at Johnathan Woods was," she said. "And the girl there was too in love with 'im to see it." She shook her head and clucked her tongue.

"I told 'im 'is orders would bring on trouble," she said. "Yes, sir, Ella Mae told 'im, but 'e wouldn't listen.

"The poor luv. She come 'ere asking after 'im. When I told 'er Johnathan 'ad left strict orders not to be viewed, she just folded 'er 'ands together and sat down. Didn't cry, didn't argue—just sat there staring into space. I offered to fetch 'er some tea and she nodded meself a yes. Then I left 'er alone while I went back to the kitchen to put the kettle on. When I come back, she was gone. I never saw 'er again."

"Then Johnathan Woods is dead?" I asked.

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She rubbed a smile off her lips. "Course 'e's dead," she said. "Dead and cremated."

She fetched a book off a desk and handed it to me. "Johnathan's guest book," she said. "When you find the girl, give it to 'er. It'll make 'er face the fact that 'e's gone."

"What killed Johnathan Woods?" I asked.

"Transit worker's accident," she said. "A pane a glass fell from the overhead at Gloucester Road Station and shattered near 'is feet. 'E caught a shard in 'is thigh and bled to death. At least that's what young Doctor Firth put on the Registry of Death."

I thanked her and left the building. Hurrying down the steps to the sidewalk, I turned right past lighted basement windows. I imagined young Doctor Firth down there in the bowels of the building preparing his guests for burial and the imagining quickened me pace. I rounded the corner on Charles II Street and came upon three side entrances to the building, each with its own sign on the door.

Employees Only,

Medical Entrance, and

Suite 201, they read in order.

Me feet stopped in front of 201 and me hand found the key in me pocket. Me senses noted the absence of anyone on the street.

"Occupied," Ella Mae's voice came back. "By James Edward Vickers hisself."

Dead end, eh, ratbag? me inner voice punned. Care to go in and 'ave a look at the old man? Or do corpses still turn your belly inside out?

I kept walking—past the end of the building, past the small shops, and onto Regent Street, where I hailed a cab. I got in and give me driver the name of me hotel. Then me eyes snagged the headlines of the newspaper someone had left on the seat.

BODY OF TRANSPORT FOREMAN FOUND IN LADYWELL CEMETERY, it read.

Intrigued, I picked it up and started reading. I got as far as the bloke's name—Bartel it was—before me driver interrupted by asking me to swing the cab door shut. When I did, the lights in the back went out. The driver pulled into traffic and I set the paper down.

"The bugger 'ad jewels," me driver said.

"What bugger?" I asked.

"The one in the paper," he said. "J. P. Bartel. Yesterday I picked 'im and this muscle man 'e was with up on Jermyn Street. 'E 'ad this paper sack with 'im. 'E opened it up and started pulling jewelry

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out of it—laughing the whole time 'cause the other joker didn't want meself to see them.

"Next thing I know, I pick up the paper and see 'is picture on the front page. I figured it was the jewelry what done 'im in so I rung up the police to tell them what I knew. Turns out they ain't found no jewelry in the bugger's flat. But they did find pornographic photographs in envelopes addressed to Holland. They figure it was the pornography what got 'im killed."

"What did the jewelry look like?" I asked.

"Strangest stones I ever seen. 'Ad bugs inside of 'em." He pulled up in front of me hotel, reached over his seat, and swung the door open.

On a hunch, I dug the picture of Genny and her miner out of me pocket and showed it to him. "Was this one of the men?" I asked.

"Build's the same," he said, "but the 'air's all wrong. This bloke 'ad short blond 'air."

I thanked him and paid me fare.

"Mind if I take the paper?" I asked.

" 'Elp yourself, mate," he said. "Me shift's almost over and I reckon I've got all the conversation I can get out of it."

I took the paper up to me room, sat on me bed, and read about the late J. P. Bartel. It seems that he was found yesterday by the groundskeeper of the Ladywell Cemetery. He'd been beaten to death. There was no mention of pornography or anything else illegal. The way the paper read, you would a thought that J. P. Bartel was just another hard-working bloke what got done in by hooligans.

Did J. P. Bartel have anything to do with Genny's disappearance?

Probably not, logic told meself. But still there was the driver's insistence about the jewelry and there was the pendant I'd found. And Johnathan Woods had worked for the transit system. I put the possibilities to bed with a sleeping pill and fell into sleep.

Genny O'Thompson invaded me dreams. I saw her walking on the muddy waters of the Thames, her body outlined in flames that seared the flesh away. But she wouldn't sink. No matter how hard she struggled, she couldn't sink. I jerked meself awake, got up, walked to me window, and threw it open. Immediately, the icy night air slapped me into full wakefulness. The face on me travel clock read 12:15 A.M.

I turned on the lights, found Johnathan's guest book, and opened it to the only page with signatures on it.

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Me heart skipped a beat.

There, in that same heavy scrawl that had written the address of the funeral parlor on the note I'd found in Genny's flat, was the name J. P. Bartel. So it was Bartel who had given Genny the key to Suite 201. But why did he do that? Did he just feel sorry for her because he knew she hadn't been allowed to view Johnathan's body? Is that why he gave her the key? If so, then why was the key left in her drawer? Why was the note still on it? And why was Bartel killed just fourteen days after Johnathan Woods' funeral? Something wasn't right.

Below Bartel's name was the address 52 Amyruth Road, Lewisham. I checked me map of London and saw that Amyruth Road was one block from the cemetery where his body had been found.

There was only one other signature on the page in the guest book—a Michael Robinson whose address was 63 Jermyn Street, Westminster. I checked me map again. Michael Robinson lived less than two blocks from the St. Edwards Funeral Parlor.

Coincidences were beginning to pattern themselves around Number 33 St. James's Place. I decided to find out why.

I took the Underground to Piccadilly Circus and walked the rest of the way.

Permission to enter subject to prior approval by the management, a sign on the door read. *Visitors, please use the front entrance on St. James's Place.*

I took the silver key from me pocket, slipped it into the lock, and turned it until I heard the tumbler click free. Then I entered Suite 201 and shut the door behind meself. Muted light from an overhead lamp fell into a room that looked like someone's private pub. In the far right corner was a bar. To the left of the bar was a door and in front of it was a pair of Chippendale couches and two easy chairs. In front of them, looking grotesquely out of place, was a bronze coffin on a solid marble stand. The front and back lids were open and the occupant was gone. There was a small portable ladder in front of the marble stand.

I walked over to the coffin and peered inside. Indentations in the blue-satin pillow and a crumpled quilt told me that someone had been resting here.

Me eyes moved from the mattress to the open lids. The front lid was padded on the inside for the comfort of the occupant whose legs might spasm against it. There was no padding on the inside of the upper lid. It was made of polished bronze. There was a battery-

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powered light near the front and a handle behind the light. I tugged on the handle and a bronze plate slid backward, revealing a pane of thick glass—a window into the coffin. I supposed that coffins could be ordered with anything the buyer wanted, but I couldn't figure out why anyone would want a window and a light.

The sound of voices outside the door gave me no time to ponder. I ducked behind the bar and maneuvered meself into a position where I could see into the room. Ella Mae marched into the room. The white-haired James Edward Vickers followed in her wake as did a young man in a doctor's white coat with a hypodermic syringe in his right hand. Behold the walking dead, me inner voice said. All decked out in his Sunday suit for burial.

But it wasn't James Edward Vickers who held me attention. It was Ella Mae. She had a quilt draped over her arm and a look of steely determination on her face.

She led the men over to the coffin. "I tell you, Ella Mae," Vickers said to her, "it's damn cold inside a coffin. Damn cold."

" 'Ere, 'ere, Mr. Vickers," she cooed. "I brung you an extra quilt to toasty you up a bit. Made it meself, I did." She give the quilt a loving rub and smiled at Vickers.

"It's creepy, Ella Mae," Vickers said. "Having to sleep in a coffin in case unexpected visitors come. And getting ready for the expected ones—that's the creepiest of all. The lid gets shut. Then I turn on that light and open that damn viewing window. I close my eyes and have to listen to my friends talk about how alive I look dead. I stay like that until you come back to let me out again. And all the time I'm thinking about being buried alive. Can you imagine what that's like?"

Ella Mae clucked her tongue and give Vickers a pat on the shoulder. "Your funeral's tomorrow," she told him. "After it's over, you'll be free to go. You'll 'ave a new name an' identity, too, luv. An' you won't 'ave to be looking back over your shoulder all the time for them what we done business with before. Will 'e, Doctor Firth?"

The man in the white coat nodded his agreement.

"I can't sleep in a coffin," Vickers said.

"Maybe a sedative would help," Doctor Firth said.

"I don't like needles," Vickers said. "I'd rather stay awake than face a needle, you know that."

Firth shrugged and set the syringe down on the marble stand.

"Come on, luv," Ella cooed to Vickers. "Up you go."

Vickers climbed the ladder and settled hisself inside the coffin.

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Ella Mae tucked the quilts around him, then closed the bottom lid over Vickers' legs and give him a pat on the cheek. She walked to the head of the coffin and abruptly swung the upper lid closed. As Firth turned the key in its lock, Vickers started screaming.

"Let me out!" he yelled. *"Let me out!"*

His voice fell silent and I heard the click of bronze on bronze. Light from within the casket flashed on and off with each click, then the clicking stopped and light beamed out from within the coffin. Ella Mae leaned over the viewing window and stared at the man inside. "You shoulda listened to Ella Mae, James," she scolded. "You shoulda taken the sedative. It'd made things a whole lot easier for you. The coffin's airtight. You got eight hours left."

She stepped back and looked at Doctor Firth. " 'E shoulda known we couldn't let 'im leave the business," she said. "If 'e'd a just thought on it a little, 'e woulda known 'e knows too much to be left alive."

She give the glass window a loving pat.

"You knew too much, luv," she said. "You knew the new identities of all our past clients. And they have ways of getting the truth out of those you leave behind. Terrible ways. So you see, luv, if we say you're dead, then you have to be that way. Doesn't 'e, Doctor Firth?"

Young Doctor Firth shrugged a reply and they left the room.

I listened to Vickers' muffled cries, to the sound of his fingernails scraping at the glass, to the pounding within the casket. It grated me nerves, scraping them down to the primitive urge to run and never look back, but I couldn't leave a dog to die like that.

I went to the coffin and opened the lid. Vickers lunged for me throat and I knocked his hands away. Then I cracked him hard enough across the face to replace his panic with pain. He slumped back into the coffin and stared at meself. Confusion drifted onto his face.

"Come on, mate," I said and flung the other lid open. "Let's get you outa there."

He accepted me help out of the coffin and over to the sofa, where he sat down. "There's no way out," he said. "If Ella Mae or Doctor Firth don't get me, they will. I'm as good as dead."

"Who's they?" I asked.

"The PLO. The KGB. Union bosses. Criminals." Defeat was in his voice. "Anyone who ever rented out 201 to disappear. I'm a threat to them. I know who they are. I forged their new identities. Not even Ella Mae or Doctor Firth knew who they became. Ella Mae, she just rented out 201 and kept the visitors out. Doctor Firth, he

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signed the registries of death. No one but me actually knows who they are today. Don't you see what a threat I became? That's why I agreed to pretend my own death. I thought that if they thought I was dead, I'd be safe. All I wanted to do was retire from this business."

"So why the double-cross?" I asked.

"Because Ella Mae and Doctor Firth knew our past clients might go to great lengths to prove I'm really dead. They wanted to be able to provide that proof." He hugged hisself. "I've wanted out for a long time," he said, "but I never had the courage to try. Then I found that girl in the coffin—and I knew I had to get out."

He looked at me, stunned by the realization he'd told a perfect stranger too much.

"What girl in what coffin?" I demanded.

No answer. He stared at me with eyes full of fear.

"They sent you," he said.

"I don't hire out for murder," I told him. "A mate a meself sent me over 'ere to find 'is daughter. I traced 'er 'ere."

The look on his face sent me heart sliding down to me toes.

"Not Genny O'Thompson?" he said, his eyes full of pain.

I knew then without asking that she was the girl in the coffin. But this was Thompson's daughter. And I knew how much Thompson loved her. I had to confirm what common sense already told me. "Genny was the girl in the coffin?"

He nodded affirmation and buried his face in his hands. I grabbed his hands and pulled them free. "Tell me who put her there!"

"Woods had to have left her there," he said. "I found her in his coffin the day of his funeral and he was gone. There were black-and-blue marks around her throat. She'd been strangled."

"What happened to her body?"

"I took her downstairs and cremated her."

Cremated. The terrible word echoed through me mind. What was I going to tell Thompson? How could I?

Then it hit me that something had to be done about Johnathan Woods. Thompson would want something done.

"What happened to Johnathan Woods?"

"Ella Mae dyed his hair blond and he became Michael Robinson. My God, the man has nerve. It was all he could do not to laugh at his own funeral. He was there, along with his friend, Bartel."

"Did Woods kill Bartel?" I asked.

"It wouldn't surprise me. Beating him to death would be his style."

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I gave the man a look that made him back into the corner of the couch. "You're going to ring Woods up." I kept me voice low and mean. "You're going to get 'im over 'ere."

"But what will I tell him?"

"Tell 'im you've got a buyer for the jewelry 'e's been trying to sell. A rich buyer."

Vickers did as ordered. He and meself shuffled outside 201 to a call box down the street. I stood there while he rang up Woods, and I listened to what he said.

"I told you when you first came to me that I had connections all over the world," he said. "This man Jenkins heard about you through one of them. Yes, I've checked him out personally. He's a bloody millionaire with a penchant for antiquities. No, it can't wait until tomorrow—he's leaving for Australia in the morning. Good. We'll be waiting for you in Suite 201."

He hung up.

"He'll be here as soon as he's dressed," he said.

Forty minutes later Johnathan Woods was sitting on a sofa in Suite 201, with an open briefcase full of jewelry made like the pendant in me coat pocket. I was standing with me back to the marble stand, facing him.

"Bartel and me was digging for this pipe in the Underground," he was saying, "when we hit on this cache of jewelry. Bartel, 'e took it to a bloke 'e knew what works in the gem section of the Museum of Natural History. Turns out this stuff is early Roman from around 120 A. D. Probably got buried by some bugger what died before 'e 'ad a chance to dig it up again. Those buggers were always burying valuables in their back yards. Anyway, the stuff's clean, and it's priceless."

"Who's this Bartel?" I asked. "I don't like silent partners."

"Bartel's silent, all right," he joked. "The bugger's dead. I seen to that personally. Then I planted some stuff in 'is flat what points the finger at organized crime. Johnathan Woods don't like no partners, and 'e don't leave no loose ends, either. Ain't that right, Mr. Vickers? 'Ow'd you like that little surprise I left for you in me coffin?"

Vickers stared at him in disbelief.

Woods laughed in a way that made me skin crawl. Head back, mouth open, spittle spraying around the room. Crazed enjoyment on his face.

"Did you kill the girl?" I asked.

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The look he give me questioned me intelligence.

" 'Course I killed 'er," he said. "She was a loose end. You see, she found out I was still alive because Bartel felt sorry for 'er an' left 'is key to 201 with 'er landlady. 'E told me 'e even wrapped a note around it so's she'd know just what the key was for. Bloody fool.

"Well, she come sneaking into 201 an' caught meself alive. I damn near fainted when she seen me standing at the bar lifting a glass of whiskey. Then she started crying and carrying on 'bout me not caring for 'er. I told 'er I done it all for 'er. Told 'er I'd planned all along to make a fortune by selling the jewels on the black market and then coming back to fetch 'er. I told 'er we'd be married after me funeral. Then I sent 'er 'ome.

"But she was a threat to me alive and I 'ad no intention of getting meself tied down with such a dumb bird. So I 'ad Bartel ring 'er up and tell 'er to come back and see me again. She was such a stupid little fool. Went and left 'er key at 'ome, she did, so she 'ad to knock on the door to get in.

"Anyway, I killed 'er that night."

He was looking the other way but he felt the sting of the needle when I injected him. It surprised him, but I had me knee squarely in his chest before he could do anything about it. I kept it there until I seen him begin his slow drift into fairyland. Then I helped him to his feet and walked him over to the coffin. Vickers helped me get him inside and close the lid over his legs. Then I slapped him hard enough to pull him back to reality. I took the key to 201 and Bartel's note from me pocket and held them up for him to see.

"I found these in a drawer in Genny's flat," I said. "She'd banded the note to the shaft of the key just like this. Maybe she knew someone would find it if she didn't come back. Maybe Genny wasn't as stupid as you thought."

Dangling the key over his face, I enjoyed watching fear claw its way to the surface of his brown eyes. He tried to speak, but the words failed to come. He tried to move, but the sedative had severed his nerve connections and he just lay there staring at meself. The note unwrapped itself from the shaft and fell onto his forehead.

"I'm Genny's godfather," I lied. Then I closed the lids on Johnathan Woods.

He was buried in the plot reserved for James Edward Vickers.

Finding Johnathan Woods inside the coffin where they 'ad left Vickers must have been quite a shock for Ella Mae and Doctor Firth.

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Maybe it was what shocked them into deciding to get out of the funeral business, because they sold the building shortly after Vickers' funeral.

Funny thing about those two. They both died within three months of one another. Ella Mae Fitzgerald was killed in a hit-and-run accident on St. Charles's Street in London. After her death, Doctor Firth migrated to Canada, where he was killed in a boating accident. They say accidents do happen, but I'll always wonder if their accidents weren't engineered by a few of Vickers' more notorious clients—clients with enough money and influence to prove there was a body buried in Vickers' grave and then to eliminate the other two links to Suite 201.

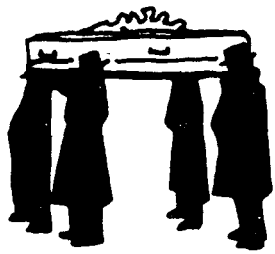
Vickers doesn't want me finding out what really happened to them because he's quite content with his new identity and life in Australia. He has friends there—old and powerful friends who would do almost anything to protect him.

It was me what told Thompson his daughter was gone. And that big man cried on me shoulder like a baby. I wrapped me arms around him and just held him until the tears stopped coming. When it was over, he give me a hug.

"Thank you, son," he said, "for what you done for our Genny."

What happened to the jewelry? you ask.

Well, it's been showing up on the black market in Australia. That's where I send it whenever I need a few extra notes in me pocket. You see, I've got meself an antiquities dealer there with enough close friends around the world to get me what it's worth. He goes by the name of James Edward Wickers and he doesn't dare double-cross meself.



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Morris Hershman

The Wrong Man

Two of us had just come out of the swimming hole on the northeast end of the family farm. It happened to be a seasonable Sunday in the beginning of May. Crops had been planted, so there wouldn't be another eighteen-hour day for any of us guys until next month's harvest. It was a time to rest, to play games, to think, to talk idly.

Bert, one of my older brothers, joined us on the grassy bank. Sunbeams glanced off the water behind him. We were just a few yards from the nearest neighbors' property.

"Foreigners," he complained, looking over there. "They never even show up for church on Sunday."

He sounded a little self-satisfied about that. Maybe he guessed that our new neighbors weren't sure God wanted to look at anybody who wasn't American.

I had to put in my own two cents, if only to rattle Bert's teeth a bit.

"Those people must know by now that a lot of folks are dead set against them, so you can't blame 'em for not showing themselves around more."

The "foreigners" had bought the property the Donaldsons and their parents and grandparents had farmed for generations. A combination of hard times and bad weather and debts and interest-costs had ganged up on them. The Donaldsons had gone into the heap, as my father said grimly. Going into the heap was the worst thing anybody could do.

Bert pushed away a calf that wanted to take a chew at him. "You always stick up for everybody, Gene."

I said something to make the claim that I was as nasty and short-sighted as anybody else from Piper's Ridge to Wedwind, the county seat. Still, my brother Lloyd looked at me and said, "I don't see you mooching over there to say hello, much as you stick up for 'em. You don't really feel different from anybody else. Admit it."

Anybody who has ever had brothers will know how that conversation finished up. A dare was made and it had to be taken. A boy has to convince others he's brave as a lion, tamping down the shivers deep inside him.

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It was two hours shy of supper when I started out. I was really leery by this time. Father and Mother hadn't moved a muscle to make these people feel welcome. Father sometimes looked down at his Credit Union bills and asked how those foreigners had got up enough money to buy the Donaldson place. Mother sniffed that Piper's Ridge was getting to be like New York.

I'd hardly got under way, it seemed, before I was at the northeast end of our property.

Inventing an excuse to be there didn't take more than another minute. There was a mulberry tree with a shabby tire hanging by a thick rope from its biggest limb. That was where we kids and the Donaldson boys used to play when we didn't want to swim or miss baseballs. The new people hadn't taken it down, although everybody knew they didn't have kids of their own.

A dust-free old tractor was inching its way along the field. I'd been too busy thinking to notice it until a shaft of setting sunlight struck its side.

I pulled back and wished I was somebody else. The tractor, halfway down the soybean field, stopped cold. Whoever was driving it had noticed me.

By squinting from under a raised hand, I made out strong features and wide eyes, and a handkerchief around the head. It must be a woman.

The next move was up to me. I waved a hand.

The tractor edged up closer. The woman was looking to my right and left and past me. Did she think I had come out with a posse?

Somebody had to talk first, to show feeling, to imitate friendliness.

"I'm one of your neighbors," I called to her as she climbed down. "I'm Gene Fisher from next door."

She didn't answer until she was satisfied there wasn't anybody else with me.

"I am happy to meet." Her voice was deep, but not a bit mannish. "Do you like to have some milk?"

"Yes, I'd like that very much, ma'am, thank you."

I didn't stay scared for long, probably because their house wasn't as cluttered as ours—not as good, so to speak. The furniture I did see was very clean, very neat. I could look at a smaller image of my face in a shiny table.

The man of the house was drinking steamy tea from a mug when I came in. He was big, with a sleek beard and smoky eyes. The

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woman talked to him in their native language for a minute, probably letting him know what had happened outside.

Listening to them, I spoke without thinking. "Hungarian is a funny-sounding language," I said. Somebody had told me they were from Hungary.

They looked wonderingly at each other, then he remembered to be hospitable and turned to me. I asked for tea instead of milk because it looked like strong stuff. It was—and so hot it paralyzed the roof of my mouth for a while.

I found out that he was named Sergei and she was Olga. We didn't talk about anything much, all of us in different ways practicing our English. When it was time to go, I said I'd come around again. I never mentioned the tire swing that I had figured to use as an excuse for coming in the first place.

My brothers, when I told them what I'd done, spent only a few minutes calling me a liar. After that, they hung on every word. Lloyd, the practical one, made the sensible suggestion that I shouldn't tell Dad or Mother about this caper, as he called it. Bert made me promise to tell him everything I saw or did at the Donaldsons, which is how we still referred to the place, if I went back.

I didn't hesitate about dropping by again after school in the middle of the next week. Sergei and Olga seemed glad to have such company as I was able to offer. A lone child among childless adults gets plenty of fuss made over him, and I was anxious to be treated along those lines.

It turned out that Mr. and Mrs. Ketlerov—that was their last name, and don't think it didn't take me a long time to say it right—hadn't come from Hungary at all. They were Russian.

Sergei didn't talk much about his life back in Russia. One time, though, he said he had known someone over there he would like to hammer down on. His smoky eyes narrowed and his jaw grew tight. Both hard hands turned into fists. Olga stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at her husband as if she suddenly didn't like him a bit. I was so embarrassed I ran off when they started yelling at each other in Russian.

But I went back—and saw how gentle Sergei could be when he had to put a sick calf to sleep. I had gone over to say I was sorry for having left so quick last time. (Manners are the happy way of doing things, as my mother never got tired of reminding the whole family.) Olga suggested gently that I wait with her in the kitchen until the

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chore was over. Given the choice, though, I decided to be where the man's work was being done.

Sergei buried the animal as quickly and simply as Father ever did and I heard him mutter a few words in his native language over the grave. It surprised me. Everybody knew that Russians aren't religious. In at least that way he must have been different from most of them.

Sergei was silent until we had walked back to the house, then he said only a few words to Olga in Russian with annoyance on his face. Olga answered him in the same way and I thought they must have been spoiling to argue again. But Olga caught herself and insisted I sample some more tea. It was high-octane stuff all right, the Ketlerovs' tea. We were soon talking together again, the three of us, but I noticed that although the two of them talked politely to me, their tone with each other had an edge.

By the middle of May I had worked up the nerve to suggest to Father and Mother that the Ketlerovs ought to be welcomed by their closest neighbors.

It was so much wasted breath. Father didn't want anything to do with people who would buy the Donaldson place and that seemed to be his last word on the subject. Mother felt, or said she felt, the Russian man ought to be kept as far as possible from my younger sister, Mavis, but wouldn't say why.

I hinted to Sergei and Olga that I thought it was a shame they didn't know more people. With twelve municipalities in the county, as well as Wedwind, it ought to have been possible for them to find another couple their age they could like. It would have been rude to say that some outside sociability might keep them from slashing at each other so much of the time.

That notion went down pretty smoothly with Sergei, at any rate, so I added that they might want to attend church at Piper's Ridge on Sunday. Sergei, who seemed to have some religious feelings, was giving the idea his consideration when Olga started to snap at him in Russian. Another argument was in the works, so I made my excuses and got away quick.

Between that afternoon and Sunday, I saw Olga twice in town, once coming out of the bank and once on her way into a feed dealer's. She smiled and nodded at me, but didn't stop to talk. I supposed her grip on business was surer than Sergei's—he hardly came into town at all . . .

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On Sunday, as it happened, the amiable Reverend Gillis didn't have to welcome the Ketlerovs from the pulpit before going into his sermon. There was no sign of them.

After church, some two dozen families crossed the road on State 107 where it turns into Commerce Street, after obeying the one dusty traffic light in town, and at the Piper Hotel the elders settled down for some worldly pleasures. The women went to the auditorium to enjoy the management's weekly slide show and the men gathered at the coffeehouse to talk about their crops, their livestock, the Production Credit Union, and their conviction that the year's results alone would determine whether or not they could continue at their vocation.

We younger kids played such games as we could, considering we were dressed in our Sunday clothes, while the older boys and girls sidled around each other and flirted.

That Sunday I found myself near the coffeehouse. My brother Bert was being snide about the Ketlerovs not showing up for church, a possibility which I'd mentioned to him. I suggested that one of them might be sick and got another sarcasm in return.

"Excuse me, young sir."

A man with an accent that reminded me of Sergei's had approached me on the sidewalk. He was about six feet tall and wore the only gold tooth I've ever seen to this day. "I hear you speak of someone name of Ketlerov."

Bert gave me a look and went over to talk with Joylene Shapp. "I am myself Russian," the man continued, "a refugee, you may be sure. I wonder if this countryman of mine is living in the neighborhood. My own name is Yosko."

I minded my manners and asked how he did. Mr. Yosko took that as an invitation to keep talking.

"I have photograph of my friends, which I keep with me as I have not seen them in so long. Here they are."

He passed two black-and-white pictures over to me.

Sergei looked younger without his beard, but there was no mistaking those intense eyes. Olga's strong features weren't muffled by the dark curls at the sides of her face. Neither seemed especially pleased about having their pictures taken. I could understand that. I don't like it myself.

Mr. Yosko read the recognition in my eyes.

"Tell me where to find them," he said urgently, forgetting his own manners.

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I wasn't sure what to do. Sergei and Olga might not like Mr. Yosko, for all I knew. But he did carry their photographs around, so there must be some friendly feeling on his side. Plus which, it came to me, Olga would probably be a lot more chipper if she and Sergei were seeing somebody from their native country once in a while. (I didn't realize until much later in life that as a youngster I somehow saddled myself with an overwhelming desire to help make other people's lives come out right—a way of thinking of no use whatever to a farmer.)

"I'll tell you how to get there," I said.

I remember feeling good when the man left, even though he was in such a hurry he forgot to thank me. I guessed he was that eager to see his friends again.

I was figuring to stop over at Sergei's and Olga's eventually to let them know I'd been the one to direct Mr. Yosko to them. I'd be very modest about it, and imagined being invited to share some vodka with them for the first time, they would be so grateful to me for what I'd done. But there wasn't any time those next few days to consider the Ketlerovs. Father had decided he'd waited long enough for the wheat fields to dry after a heavy rain and we started cutting.

The old combine worked through the first and second fields. Wheat poured from the harvester to the grain truck, which Lloyd was driving because his feet reached to the floorboards. I rode with him. Bert was with Father in the combine. It didn't look like too much rain had lodged our wheat down to a point where the combine couldn't reach it, but some of it was bound to be wet after those rains and Father expected a dockage fee at the grain elevator in Wedwind.

Nevertheless, he looked grim when he saw the amount of dockage listed on the grain-elevator price ticket Mother brought back. Still, the corn was tall and beginning to tassel some weeks ahead of the normal season. Father said that if the corn and soybeans and milo behaved themselves, and cattle and hog prices weren't too bad, the season might turn out tolerable after all. Mother said grimly that after the last few seasons she was almost afraid to think it was possible.

Before going to sleep the night after all the grain had been accounted for, I turned on the small radio in my room. There was a news program on the half hour, which it seemed to me the station put on to keep you from enjoying the music too much. That was how

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I heard about the disappearance of a Russian named Mischa Yoskovlev.

It seemed that Mr. Yoskovlev was visiting the U.S. with a farm delegation from Russia. Three days ago he had gone off for the day in a rented car and hadn't come back. The car had been found crashed a little off U.S. 24 not far from Wedwind. There was no sign of Mr. Yoskovlev. It was possible that his body had pitched into the nearby river. Anybody with information was asked to phone the state police at a special number.

Yoskovlev? He had to be Mr. Yosko! I was so surprised and agitated I had to get up and pace the room. He had lied to me about being a refugee and about his name.

I had to let the state police know about him. But even before that, I must go over and tell Sergei and Olga what I was duty bound to do. The state police would want to talk to them, and I didn't want my new friends to be frightened because they didn't know the reason for it in advance.

I slept very badly.

Luck was on my side in the morning in that there were few chores to be done. As soon as I could get away, after lunch, I headed for the Donaldson place.

As I approached the house, I noticed the Ketlerovs' combine in the sun. It had belonged to the Donaldsons, and one of their kids had once told Bert that its air-conditioner had conked out and they couldn't afford to have it fixed. Keeping the machine in the sun was sure to make it hotter, so I went up to test the heat on the metal—maybe it hadn't been in the sun long.

I pulled up short.

Stains were coloring the sickle bar—stains that hadn't been there only a few days ago, stains of the sort I had seen many times, caused by the blood of animals. It seemed very unlikely that such stains would have got onto a combine, even as far down as the drive chains, or that the combine would have been left in the sun for any reason except to fade the stains enough so they were not unmistakable.

Vividly, I imagined what must have happened not long ago. A man had been knocked unconscious, then carried outside and the combine brought into action. Its steamboatlike reel would pull against the sickle bar, but it wasn't stalks that were being cut this time, not stalks that were spun back against the threshing machinery inside the gigantic harvester. Later on those insides would be

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cleaned—by which time the machine's fresh contents could have been disposed of in nothing larger than one bloodied garbage bag.

And hadn't Sergei said there was one Russian on whom he wanted to commit violence?

I told myself not to think about any of that again.

I decided not to stay, but just as I turned away I heard the screen door of the farmhouse open. I looked and saw Olga step out onto the porch as if she was walking on air, her face lit with a radiant smile. For the first time in my recollection, Olga was happy.

The smile disappeared as soon as her eyes registered my presence—and almost in touching distance of the combine's drive chains. She actually pulled back and drew a hand over the lower half of her face, as if to keep from being recognized.

And then I heard the voice of a man inside the house. Without knowing a word of Russian, I was sure that his words would have translated into the simple question: "What's wrong?"

Olga's rushed answer was just as clear to me: "Everything is all right."

But her voice was quavering, and she hurried back as if to block the door. Why, I wondered, would she want to keep me from seeing Sergei?

But I think I knew even before the screen door was flung open from inside.

The man who stood there was not a complete stranger and he saw from my reaction that comprehension had dawned in me and winced. After all, I did know now why he had really come this far, why he had committed a brutal murder with a type of farm tool he must have used for years, and why he wanted the world to think he was dead. It was plain that not only did he love Olga, but that she in turn loved him to distraction.

Looking at him, I knew the whole truth. And that included the fact that I was one of the few people in the county who had ever seen Sergei alive.

I have never run as fast in my life as I ran from there.

"Q"

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Ed Conrow

Waikiki Green

"Benny!" Gloria was calling to me. I turned and noticed she was holding an expensive-looking wallet. Gloria is the love of my life, not to mention my partner in Zippy Tours. She became my lifetime partner after the Waikiki diamond-heist affair a few years ago. She became a partner in Zippy Tours when she was kind enough to bail King Louie and me out of hock with the balance of her stateside bank account.

The pina colada was going down easylike. Cool. Tantalizing. My throat was parched and hoarse from explaining the wonders of Waikiki and the Polynesian Cultural Center to the last tour group of the day.

"Speak, angel," I said as she joined me at the bar.

"It was on the bus," she replied. Gloria is what a Polynesian goddess should look like. Tan and supple. A beauty in an ankle-length lavender-and-white dress, a fragile orchid behind one ear.

She handed me the wallet. "I found it on the bus. Under a seat by the window in the middle of the bus." Before I could check if there was any ID in it, she beat me to the punch. "Would you settle for a motel receipt made out to H. Smith? The Palms Motel. I think it's that third-rater near Kamekahuela and Queen. And two ten-dollar bills. Nothing else."

I drained the pina colada. Harvey, who owns the chow-mein palace and deli where Zippy Tours conducts its business, reached out a hand for my empty glass.

I nodded for a refill and examined the sealskin wallet, which had a money smell to it plus something like musk cologne. "Did we have an H. Smith on the last tour today?" I asked Gloria.

"Go you one better, Benny. No H. Smith on either of the two trips today. I checked the passenger lists. The first tour was just a run out to Diamond Head and a fast smorgy brunch at Big Hips Makaloo's tourist trap."

The bus is checked carefully after each trip to make sure the pilgrims are reunited with anything they left behind. False teeth once, a hula hoop once, and—our greatest challenge—a black garter belt, which to this day we have failed to figure out the whys and

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wherefores of. Anyway, whoever H. Smith was, I hoped he enjoyed the Cultural Center even though he lost his wallet.

Gloria had the trip sheet in her hands. "We had a Bill Gladdis from Cut Bank, Montana," she began. "A Fred Bristol from Danbury, Connecticut. It was his wife Zelda who made you sing the 'Hawaiian War Chant' three times. Three more men—L. Biffy, J. Parker, and a Loo Chan. Three more women—nuns from a convent in Brisbane, Australia. The penguins, you called them. They loved you, Benny—"

I dialed the Palms Motel. Someone picked up the phone and I heard kids howling in the background. A female voice yelled at them to stop playing football outside the office and get lost.

"It's a bit noisy here," she said. "You better speak up."

"Benny Makahali, Zippy Tours downtown. Someone left a wallet on our bus this afternoon. His name, H. Smith, is on one of your receipts in the wallet. The receipt is dated yesterday. Paid for three days, Cottage 14."

The pina colada refill looked inviting. Harvey and Gloria were small-talking at the bar. Wo Chin, who is Harvey's major domo in the kitchen, was sitting in a booth, cheating to beat the band in a one-man version of fantan.

The woman at the Palms Motel told me H. Smith hadn't been seen since he checked in yesterday. I told her I'd drop the wallet off on my way home.

He told me his name is Cracker and that he and his wife manage the Palms Motel. He was tall and string-bean skinny with bloodshot eyes and nicotine-stained fingers. He was holding a howling kid in his arms and a strong whiff of ammonia tells me the kid's soggy diaper is due for a change.

"Whatcha got that belongs to H. Smith?" asked Cracker. To make my day, I also smelled a breath generated by a six-pack of brew. I let Cracker know that I had a wallet for which I would like a receipt.

"Inside," he mumbled. "The missus will get you one." He was licking his lips in anticipation of what might be in the wallet. A yellow dog came padding across the crushed-oyster-shell driveway and stopped to sniff my heels. Then my ankles. He spotted Gloria waiting inside the car and he dashed over and yapped his fool head off at her. Gloria told him to go away and rolled up the window on her side. "Friendly dog," I said. Cracker's noncommittal.

I opened a rusted screen door and a bell tinkled over my head. The motel office had been overly sprayed with what the can on the

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counter tells me is Jasmine Secret. Between Cracker, the howling kid, and Jasmine Secret I had enough odors to last me the whole year.

"Full up," she says.

I tell her I'm not buying. "Makahali, Zippy Tours." I held out the wallet. "Just write me a receipt for the wallet and its contents and I'll be on my way."

She aimed to please. She took the wallet and spread the contents on the countertop. She scribbled away and handed me the receipt. One wallet, I read. Brown calfskin. I told her the wallet is sealskin. Big deal, she let me know, and corrected the receipt. Two ten-dollar bills and one motel receipt in the name of H. Smith, Cottage 14. A fan on the desk whirred away. The warm air tickled the hair on my right arm. "Would you buzz Smith's cottage?" I asked the woman.

"No use. He ain't in. Like I said on the phone, we haven't seen him since yesterday." Her eyes were a bit shifty.

"Was he a local? Any island address?" I asked.

She gave me a deep sigh and did me a big favor by finger-walking through a three-by-five plastic box she hauled out from under the counter. She pulled out a card. "Naw—mainland. Masonic Street, San Francisco. He's an Oriental feller."

The wallet with the two tens in it found a new home inside a desk drawer that she slammed shut and locked. Our eyes met and she knew what I was thinking. Long gone green. "I'll hold onto it just in case he turns up—or drops me a line," she said with a grin. I got a "So long, honey" from her and the bell tinkled once again as I left the office.

The yellow cur was half asleep under a Chinese-mandarin hibiscus bush that was waging a losing battle against leaf and flower drop. Faded red-orange flowers litter the ground beneath him. Cracker is nowhere in sight.

Gloria rolled down the car window and told me not to press my luck when I said I wanted to do some snooping at Cottage 14. "I've never known a mean dog to have a set of rubber teeth," was her homey advice.

The cottage had faded, weatherbeaten wood siding that was once painted a sickly green and pink and turquoise, but not necessarily in that order. I crunched over the crushed oyster shells toward the cottage door. The inner courtyard was deserted. The screen door squeaked as I opened it. I put a hand on the dirty brass doorknob

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that hung loose on the inner door and twisted it and then I was inside the palace last occupied by H. Smith of Masonic Street, San Francisco.

After yanking the drapes shut, I flicked on the wall switch. The bedspread on the sagging bed was a dirty white. The chair shoved under the writing desk looked like a city-dump salvage job. Cigarette ashes littered the desktop. I checked out the bathroom and felt the bath towel and washcloth that hung from a chrome bar behind the door. Both were dry. I opened the shower-enclosure door. The floor of the stall under the dripping faucet was rust-stained and a roach scurried back down the drain opening with no effort at all.

Back in the bedroom, I upended a wicker basket on top of the bedspread. A few crumpled tissues, a twisted cigarette package, an empty container that had once held store-bought potato salad. A small convenience-type refrigerator was on the floor under a black-and-white TV set on a wall bracket. The refrigerator was moaning and groaning. When I opened the door, no light went on—the bulb probably burned itself out ages ago. There was a partially empty beer can and a jar that once held macadamia nuts on the top shelf and a plastic container of something green with a white-plastic spoon alongside it on the bottom shelf, pushed toward the back. I lifted the lid. Lime gelatin with its surface broken up into chunks. The ice-cube tray is a loser—mush, soft ice.

I heard the screen door squeak and footsteps behind me, and before I could straighten up a rough hand grabbed my shirt collar and I was spun around on my heels.

"It ain't nice to snoop around, mister." It was Cracker and I had misgivings about the black hole in the muzzle of the .38 gun-barrel in his hand. "If you're curious, I got a license for the gun. What are you doing in here?"

"Looking."

"Like for what?"

"Hello, Gloria," I said.

Cracker turned his head slightly, taking his eyes off me just long enough for me to push his gun hand away and follow up with an open palm to one side of his head. I took off like a wounded bee across the oyster-shell parking lot. I reached the car and yanked the door open, sliding in next to Gloria. The engine roared into life and I made a quick U-turn, the tires spewing oyster shells that spattered tiny bits of calcified white crust against the motel office . . .

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Lieutenant Mulligan wasn't his usual cheerful self when he came by Harvey's the next morning.

"Makahali, you are in deep trouble."

"He pulled a gun on me, Mulligan."

"You were trespassing. You could even say you were doing a break-and-entry. He had a license for the gun. He's a security guard at a shopping mall." I appealed to Lieutenant Mulligan's better side.

"Breaking-and-entering at the Palms Motel? Mulligan, a guy would have to have beans rattling around in his gourd to do a B-and-E at the Palms. What a dump!"

Mulligan sighed. "Just what is your interest in this H. Smith?"

I leveled with him. "Gloria found a wallet with a Palms Motel receipt in his name on the bus." I told him what I proceeded to do with the wallet and its contents. I laid it on him that I was curious as to this mysterious H. Smith since we didn't have a passenger by that name booked on either of yesterday's tours.

Mulligan shook his head. Harvey hustled over to us and pushed a glass of ice water in front of the detective. King Louie was outside the window all dressed up in his best Waikiki duds, pushing tour handbills into the hands of passing tourists. Believe me, King Louie is a sight to see. Next time you book a tour with Zippy, be sure to get a good gander at Louie. Have your picture taken with him. Grass skirt, shell bracelets around both ankles, a straw hat covering his wide, loveable, suntanned face, a ukulele hanging from a gold cord around his neck, two fat feet slapping the warm pavement as he extolls the virtues of the eighteen-buck trip to Diamond Head and smorgasbord at Big Hips' joint.

"Makahali, you belted the guy." It was Mulligan reminding me I'd been a naughty boy.

"Okay, I did. I get antsy when a gun is aimed at me."

"He's got a black eye, head pains, dizzy spells, the whole schmear. He wants to press charges."

"You put the cuffs on me, you have to feed me," I reminded him.

Mulligan drummed his fingers in a damp pool of ice water. "Wiseguy. Okay, I'll take your word for it. Cracker tripped and fell into your fist. Period." The ice water disappeared and Mulligan crushed an ice cube into watery splinters between his teeth.

"I really like your version of the story," I said.

Mulligan rubbed a stubby finger across the damp rim of his empty glass and got a low musical tone for his effort. "Makahali—now

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comes the dirty part. Get Gloria. The three of us are going downtown."

"Huh? I thought you said you were going to square the beef for me?"

Mulligan stood up. "It has nothing to do with Cracker. We're taking a ride to the morgue."

The corpse was in a cubicle that was marked D-19. The attendant complained about his rheumatism, arthritis, the high cost of living, and why did we bust in on him just as he was going out to lunch. Gloria looked a bit pale. The disinfectant smell was heavy. The drawer slid out of its cubicle and the attendant went about his business matter-of-factly. "This must be the guy you're interested in, Lieutenant Mulligan. The tag on the toe reads Loo Chan."

Gloria's blue eyes lit up. "Loo Chan! He was on the bus!"

"Thanks for the make, Mrs. Makahali," said Mulligan. He nodded for the morgue attendant to push the drawer back in and close it up. Needless to say, I'm very fascinated by the small purple hole in the middle of Loo Chan's forehead.

Mulligan's office was small. It would never win a Good Housekeeping award. His desk was well littered and his In basket looked like it would momentarily collapse on the Out basket. Telephones rang constantly in the detectives' bullpen outside. The smell of stale tobacco-smoke was enough to choke the proverbial horse. Men and a few gals in blue were constantly on the move in the corridor outside.

"You should see the place on Saturday night," said Mulligan, reading my thoughts.

"Thanks for letting Gloria go."

"No sweat, Makahali. She gave a positive on Loo Chan and I have her statement."

"Shoot me the Loo Chan bit once more," I asked him.

Mulligan leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. The armpits of his white-silk shirt looked damp and sweat-stained. "The photos you're looking at, Makahali, are of Manny Tribaldi and J. Farrell Tropper, aka Iceman."

I stared at the mug shots. "You think they did the job on Loo Chan?"

Mulligan shrugged. "For the lack of something better, I'll have to go along with that. Both hoods will have a tough time breaking

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loose from the island. The San Francisco P.D. supplied information that the three of them may have been mixed up in the heist of a courier coming into Frisco from Hong Kong. Result: one stone-cold-dead courier in a Nob Hill hotel room and a small fortune in stones missing." Mulligan sighed. He sat his big frame forward and fixed his eyes sadly on the overloaded In basket.

"Word on the Frisco streets was that Loo Chan shafted Tribaldi and the Iceman—held out on the good stuff. When they split the heist, Tribaldi and the Iceman came away losers with the dime-store-variety jewels—if there was such a thing—and the dear, late-departed Loo Chan stashed away for himself a king's ransom in round- and square-cut beauties no less than three carats each and hightailed it out here to Honolulu. Since the emeralds have not turned up, yours truly will be reading and writing reports on this caper until my beard touches my shoe tops."

The mug shots of Tribaldi and the Iceman were getting a bit limp in my hands and I tossed them into the In basket. "Do you have a theory about what brought Loo Chan to the islands other than flaking out on his buddies?" I asked.

"Do cats have whiskers? Of course I have a theory. He came here to fence the emeralds. He probably arranged a meet in the Maori exhibit area with none other than the upright, outstanding Ike Chung, who through his benevolence will give you ten cents on a dollar on any hot rocks you lift. One of my boys, Louie Wakahome, is beating the bushes right now, trying to smoke Chung out."

Mulligan's phone rang off the hook. He picked it up, greeted the caller, then listened. And listened some more before muttering into the mouthpiece: "Bring the three of them in. Have ballistics check out the iron. I'm partial to a .22. Loo Chan got hit with a .22 long slug."

He placed the receiver back onto the cradle. "Whammo—caught the three of them."

"Come again?" I said.

"Wakahome. He caught up with Ike Chung. And, as luck would have it, this led to Tribaldi and the Iceman being picked up in Honolulu booking a fast return to the mainland."

"So now I suppose the murder of Loo Chan is solved? One of the three had a .22 on him and you're going to have the ballistics results pronto?"

Mulligan looked at me long and hard. He got up from his chair and went to the window. A smooth, gently rolling sea. Cobalt blue

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with some pale-green and a lot of whitecaps cresting as they drifted in toward the shoreline. A seagull a bit off course flashed past the window. "We struck out on the gun bit, Makahali. Those pros are too smart to be caught packing iron."

"Mulligan—"

"Yeah?"

"You never did say where Loo Chan's body was found."

"I thought I did. It was in a culvert in the city park, hidden by brush. About a half mile from the motel. Some kids playing pirates or something stumbled onto it."

"I suppose you went over his room thoroughly."

"Yeah. But it had been cleaned out when we went to check it out. Nothing but the dust balls under the poor excuse for a bed. The woman showed us where she ditched the trash. A banged-up garbage can she claimed you ran into with your car. A potato-salad container, an empty beer can, a crumpled up empty cigarette package. Loo Chan's prints on everything."

Wednesday is usually a slow day. Most tourists from the mainland, Japan, and Australia usually start popping over late Wednesday or Thursday to avoid the weekend crush. At least that's my theory and I guess I'm stuck with it. However, King Louie had managed to scrounge up sixteen pilgrims who just wanted to take things easy—the alley bazaar, the shops, Waikiki Beach, and Big Hips' place, where they can feast for five bucks on Hawaiian smorgasbord until they bust. Big Hips ends it all with his stage show and his flaming-sword dance. For five bucks extra, you get to pose with him and he lets you keep the complimentary lei of orchids and the grass skirt. The Eighteenth Century ceremonial sword you give back to him after your picture is taken.

"So how's it going, Gloria?" Big Hips asked, stopping to cool off after twenty-eight action-packed minutes on stage and grinning when Gloria pointed to a scorch in a very delicate area on his grass skirt. To me he said, "I heard you had a bummer on one of your trips—big-time jewel thief went flop-flop after bang-bang."

"Loo Chan," I acknowledged. "He caught a slug in the forehead. Mulligan says Loo Chan and two buddies were wanted in San Francisco for putting out the lights of a jewel courier from Hong Kong."

Big Hips fanned himself with a fat hand. "Gossip has it the late departed may have come to the island with a half pound of stones."

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I laughed. "Big Hips, it's all exaggerated. Would you believe only as many emeralds as would fit into the palm of my hand?"

"And the stones haven't been located," said Big Hips. "Which means they're in the possession of the killer or Loo Chan ditched them before *his* lights went out."

On the bus ride back to Harvey's, where we start and end most trips, what Big Hips said about the lights going out gnawed at my brain.

" 'Matter, Benny—got a tiger by the tail?" Gloria asked.

I nodded. "Something's bugging me about Loo Chan. But I'm drawing a big blank."

After the last pilgrim had departed the bus, I picked up Harvey's phone and called police headquarters. Mulligan finally came on the line after two long holds and one disconnect.

"What, Makahali?"

"My guess is that Tribaldi and the Iceman checked in with Ike Chung when they arrived and probably twisted his arm a bit so that he spilled the beans and they went along with him on his meet with Loo Chan at the Cultural Center."

"Brilliant, Makahali, except for one thing."

"What?"

"There never was a meeting. My guess is that Loo Chan spotted his partners while hoofing it over to the Maori exhibit area. The three are all willing to swear on a bunch of Bibles, for whatever that's worth, that they never laid eyes on Chan."

"Then what about the wallet Gloria found on the bus?"

"I thought you'd never mention it," said Mulligan. "You sure don't know your pilgrims very well, do you? Forgetting Loo Chan—"

"Like you want I should ask them for a birth certificate? A passport? You want I should thumbprint them and run a make on them all down at your place? C'mon, Mulligan, you're holding out on me—what do you know that I don't know?"

"Okay. Jackson Parker, alias Jeremiah Parker. He's a five-finger dip, a pocket man. He was on your tour out to the Cultural Center. He came back on the bus with Loo Chan. A tour like yours is a nice place to lift a poke. And he latched onto Loo Chan's wallet."

"But," I interrupted, "if Parker lifted Loo Chan's wallet, why did he leave twenty dollars in it?"

Mulligan laughed. "Leaving two tens wasn't all that important to Parker. I guess he wanted the owner of the wallet to have some food money. Anyway, Parker was picked up an hour ago in a bar on

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the waterfront. The bartender tipped us off. Parker was spending money like a wild man—fifties, hundreds, drinks all around."

"You know what, Mulligan?" I said.

"What? Make it short, Makahali. My ear is getting tired."

"There's still a killer on the loose. And the emeralds are still missing."

"Right, Makahali. But at least the pot has been sweetened. The insurance company has put up twenty-five thousand dollars for recovery of the emeralds."

King Louie was breathing heavy. He was alongside me in the bushes off to one side of the motel down at the far end. We were where the oyster shells became grass and the grass became knee-high weeds that choked out the hibiscus and bougainvilleas.

"Isn't there an easier way of doing this?" whispered King Louie, an all-action, gung-ho type prodded into this complaint, no doubt, by the hordes of creepie-crawlies and gecko lizards that kept trespassing on our legs and arms.

"Not much longer, Louie," I said. "Look—the office lights just went out." I heard the screen door squeaking. A figure was standing on the steps. There was a bright-orange arc of sparks as a cigarette was finger-flipped. From one of the cottages, a TV set blared away. Somewhere a child was crying.

"Louie," I cautioned again. "Watch out for the dog."

Fourteen was tombstone-quiet. "You sure it's empty?" whispered Louie.

"The woman said it was when I called a half hour ago. Six and nine are also empties." By this time, Louie and I were huddled together on the steps to Cottage 14.

The screen door sang its wail of rusting misery as I opened it. The doorknob was cold and covered with evening moisture. I shoved inward. "Inside, quick, Louie," I said. I felt the floor quivering under his weight and heard him yank the window drapes shut.

I flicked on a small pencil-type flashlight. Even in the dark, the room was as uninviting as when I'd first glimmed it. The refrigerator was still moaning away. Pull the plug, I thought, end its misery. I knelt down and looked under the bed. The small flashlight beam exposed exactly what Mulligan said was there—the same dust balls I had seen the day before. I stood and pulled the bedspread and one sheet back, and then the mattress. It slid on its side to the floor. I

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hefted the box spring up on one side and clawed away at the protective gauze-netting that lined the bottom.

Louie had finished giving the small clothes-closet a going over and was attacking the bathroom. I heard the porcelain toilet lid being lifted off, then the sound of water sloshing around.

"No luck, Benny," he called. "No sign of the emeralds."

"Quiet, Louie," I whispered, "you'll wake the dead!"

"The refrigerator," he whispered back a few minutes later, "is empty." Which shot down my theory that Loo Chan had stashed the emeralds inside the room in a place that had been overlooked.

But Louie and I had more important things to worry about at that very moment. The both of us were caught in the beam of a powerful flashlight and two voices were jabbering away at us to take it nice and easy and no monkey business.

Cracker and his wife took charge and marched us out of the cottage, oyster shells crunching, as we made our way to the office, where Cracker flicked on a wall switch. Bright light.

"Gotcha this time," he said, grinning ear to ear. "Ain't no law against shooting prowlers. A man's home is his castle."

"Shut up, Cracker," she ordered. She was wearing a faded-green housecoat that looked like it hadn't been washed since the day it came out of the store wrapper. Slippers that once were fluffy and pink covered her feet. Her hair was done up in curlers that looked like small space-satellites. The .22 pistol she held in her white-knuckled hand had a real, mean, business look to it. Then, to make my day, out from behind the counter doing a belly crawl comes the yellow dog—moaning and groaning and acting real sick. I had visions of getting rabies shots—if the woman didn't nail me first.

The mutt rested his chin on my shoe tops and moaned.

"Cracker, whatcha do to the dog?" she demanded.

"*Nothing,* little Momma. Little bit ago he was slurping up on the lime gelatin we cleaned out of the refrigerator in fourteen. You said for me to clean the place up, so I did. Bowser sniffed the container and liked it, so I let him slop up the gelatin. What do I know what's good for him or not? Far as I know, he'll eat anything."

The pin-up girl put a slippered foot under the dog and pushed him over on his side.

"He's got the miseries, Cracker. Red eyeballs—green foam at the mouth."

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King Louie was whispering in my ear. "I can take the guy, no sweat. You zam the broad. Count of three—"

She got mad. The .22 swung in an arc and King Louie wound up with blood trickling from a cut over his right eyebrow.

"No game-playing with me, fatty," she said. "I took the Oriental out when I came across him in the park, walking the dog, because I remembered when he registered he had a wallet big enough to choke a rhino. We were alone in the park and he was nervous, like he was hiding from someone. I told him if we went through the bushes I could get him back to the motel the back way—no one would see him. When we got to the culvert, I just let him have it. I always carry the gun in my purse for protection." She giggled. Her eyes were glazed. Cracker was breathing heavy behind me. "He said he didn't have his wallet with him, he'd lost it during the day. So I shot him. I mean, what else was I to do?"

I held up a hand. "Please," I said, "before you get too nervous with the piece. You mean you don't know anything about the emeralds?"

"The what? Say *what?*" Cracker's eyes were bulging as he faced me. The next thing I knew I heard a popping sound. King Louie had pounced on the woman and caught her under her bony chin with the heel of his hand. She crumpled to the floor, with Louie pouncing on her like a tag-team wrestler gone berserk. Cracker was just as easy. I caressed him alongside an ear with the mighty punch that is often referred to as a knuckle sandwich.

Through all the mayhem, the yellow mutt just lay on his side and groaned.

Lieutenant Mulligan ran a hand through his mop of hair that was slightly in need of a haircut, to say the least. Harvey poured ice water from the seemingly bottomless pitcher he held in his hand. "Thanks a lot, Harv," said Mulligan. Then: "Makahali, the mutt will recover. The surgery wasn't all that bad."

Gloria brushed a strand of hair away from her cheek. She was fanning herself with a slightly damp handkerchief since on some days Harvey's so-called air-conditioning doesn't work at all. Especially if a storm is boiling out to sea and the humidity is high.

Mulligan's teeth worked away on an ice cube. "A representative from the insurance company is flying in from the mainland tonight. My guess is you'll be picking up a check for twenty-five big ones for recovering the emeralds. That Loo Chan had the smarts, all right.

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Who would have thought of looking in a mess of lime gelatin inside a cruddy refrigerator for them?"

"He used an old painters' trick as camouflage—dark on dark, light on light. Nothing really shows up unless it's light on dark or dark on light. The emeralds in lime gelatin was as safe a place as any. When Cracker cleaned out the refrigerator, he let the mutt slop away on the gelatin. Result? One big bellyache for the mutt when the emeralds lodged in his intestines."

Gloria was lovely as usual. White orchid lei around her neck, black-pearl earrings, a slight touch of makeup—just a blush to accent her cheekbones. A dewdrop of perspiration on her upper lip. She smelled of gardenia—or was it frangipani?

Getting up from the bar stool, she patted Mulligan's arm. "Sorry to break this up, fellows, but we've got a payload of pilgrims on the bus outside."

Mulligan held up a big hand as an offering of apology. "I'm sorry, Gloria. Makahali—" He removed a folded square of paper from inside his jacket and smoothed it out on the bar. "What I'm trying to say is, if you want to get into investigative work professionally, fill out this form and bring it down to headquarters. We'll take your prints, a few mug shots, and check you out real good. Who knows? If you're really interested, you might wind up with a P.I. license. What do you think?"

Harvey's front window rattled. King Louie's knuckles reminding me to get the show on the road.

I took Gloria by an arm and folded Mulligan's application into my shirt pocket.

"Gee," she said in mock humor, "my Benny a private eye."

"First things first," I told her. "Tomorrow we adopt a three-year-old. He can be testy at times, but sooner or later we'll get to love his light-brown hair and sad brown eyes. His feet are much too large, I know; and—"

Gloria stood still and stared me down. "Benny! You can't adopt a baby without telling me!"

"The mutt," I said. "We pick him up at the animal shelter in the morning. He won't be too much of a bother. He can have the run of the garden. He eats most anything—including automobile tires. But I doubt if he'll look at another bowl of gelatin the rest of his life."

Gloria smiled.

"Benny Makahali, you are something. And to think I gave up the humdrum good life for you."

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I kissed her.

"Benny—"

"The natives are getting restless. Just look at them staring. But the bus isn't booked to full capacity. There's a nice big empty seat in the back. Maybe coming back from the tour we can get Louie to drive."

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Narinder Dhami

What Maisie Saw

Theyhadanotherargument today i could hear it quite clearly although i was upstairs and they were down i was supposed to be fast asleepbut id put the sleepingpills down the toilet i crept to the top of the stairs and huddled myself into my redflannel nightie alan said we werent allowed to have the heating on before november because it cost so much to heat the bloodyhouse margaret used to put it on when he went out.

why dont you take maisie with you to harrods darling said alan shed enjoy it.

yes but i wouldnt margaret said actually she rather screamed it shes incontinent every time i take her out i spend all my time looking for a bloody loo. and she dribbles oh god if only your mother were still alive.

whenever margaret says this which is frequently alan always says that its their turn to shoulder the burden. he said it now. margaret screamed that she was fedup and bored and why didnt he get a proper job instead of thumping out trashy novels on his typewriter all day then we could live ina proper house instead of this damp dry old ruin and maisie could go into a proper home.

alan was so mad after all this that he drove off in his bangedup old sportscar.i was pretty mad myself. margaret never stops wishing they had enough money to put me into a home.it doesnt exactly make me feel wanted. i heard her stumping up the stairs in her spindly stilettoes so i scampered off to my bedroom, nearly tripping over my nightie.it was too long for me and didn't fit properly like all the rest of my clothes.margaret is always asking alan for money to buy clothes for me but i always seem to end up with ripped rejects from oxfam and help the aged. margaret wears sheer black silk stockings and cashmere sweaters and italian shoes.

curled up under my covers and holding my breath sos that icould hear every sound in the bedroom next door i heard distinctly the click as margaret picked up her telephone. i made a bet with myself that she was ringing dr smythe and i promised myself two big squishy cream cakes from the freezer if i was right.

hello ian its margaret she said ina breathy kind of voice so i was

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right. i wished id promised myself a glass of sherry too. i cant take any more darling margaret was gasping i must get away darling. dr smythe must have asked her where iwas because she answered impatiently oh shes fast asleep, knocked out. and while i think about it i need some more of those sleeping pills you prescribed for her. im increasing the dose to make sure she sleeps as long as possible. silence for a minute. then margaret gave an extremely unpleasant laugh. thats not a bad idea, darling. especially if you were the doctor who writes the death certificate.

as she made arrangements to meet dr smythe in half an hour i snuggled down under my scratchy blankets to consider the situation. i was extremely perturbed. i had often heard margaret and dr smythe plotting to kill alan but i didn't realize that my death was also on the agenda. i was convinced that alan would be murdered soon but i had no intention of being victim number two.

after ten minutes i heard margaret go down the steps and slam the front door behind her so i tumbled out of bed.the corridor reeked of channel number 5 and when i opened the door of her room a fresh blast of scent greeted me. the room was a mess but i managed to find a clean jade-coloured angora sweater and a black satin evening skirt with a huge slit up the back. margarets about ten inches taller than me so i had to roll the skirt right over at the waist and it made a huge bulge under the soft sweater. after putting on a dab of dazzling damson lipstick and a smudge of babyblue eyeshadow i teetered out of the door in a pair of margarets pointed white stilettoes. the house was silent. carefully i minced down the wide staircase, batting my eyelashes at an imaginary audience. i decided to have a glass of sherry after all and 3 squishy cakes. i deserved them if margaret was planning to murder me. on my way to the kitchen i stopped to try the handle to the door of alans study. it turned.

my heart leapt. all the time i had been living with alan and margaret my consuming desire and overwhelming ambition had been to get inside alans study. he kept it locked and no-one was ever allowed in,except mrs moloney who came to do the cleaning. i had caught fleeting and tantalising glimpses inside as alan went in and out. i could hear the click click click of his typewriter late into the night. but now my chance had come.

squishy cakes and sherry forgotten, i glanced round furtively and slowly, slowly i turned the handle. a musty smell curled up into my nostrils and my eyes needed a few seconds to adjust to the dimness.gradually i could see shelves of books lining the walls , a small

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table with a plate of half-eaten bacon and egg and an overflowing ashtry, pens,pencils and papers all over the place, and there,shining silver keys beckoning, was the typewriter.

big, black and imposing, it dominated the little room. fascinated, i tiptoed over to it and caressed the keys. they were dead,but i could make them come alive. there was a piece of paper in there already.he slid his hand over her taut breasts i read without much interest.it took me a while to figureout how to remove the paper from the typewriter and slot a fresh piece in. then i began to type. the power of being able to produce perfect straight lines amazesme. my own handwriting is shaky and spidery and it takes me an age to write one sentence, but with a typewriter i can be just the same as anyone else. i hope margaret doesnt murder me before i find out how to use it properly.

MAISIE, MAISIE, MAISIE, MAISIE, MAISIE, MAISIE, MAISIE, MAISIE, MAISIE, MAISIE. How important my name looks, written tall and proud and straight in capital letters.

I could never write it so imposingly in my own hand. dr. smythe says my co-ordination is very, very bad.My co-ordination may be bad but ive got plenty of intelligence. I knew that alans leaving the study door unlocked had only been the result of his getting so mad at margaret yesterday and zooming off without thinking. it wasnt very likely to happen again.Because i couldnt bear to be without the typewriter , I began to formulate all sorts of crazy schemes to give me unlimited access to the study. As it turned out, I didnt need to use any of them because a simpler solution presented itself. As I reluctantly got up from alans leather armchair to get back to my room before that bitch returned, I noticed a large volume on one of the shelves called The Art Of Self-analysis. (Self-analysis is one of my favourite pastimes) so i reached up and pulled it off the shelf.

Judging by the dust that showered off the shelf onto my head, alan had never indulged in the art of examining ones psyche. But the volume did not hold my attention for long. I caught sight of something shiny in the space where the book had been. Curiously I reached up and groped for it. My fingers touched cold steel and I was looking at a key. A long , slim key which looked remarkably like the long, slim key alan used to unlock the study door. Trembling with excitement, I hurried outside and fitted the key into the lock. It turned noiselessly and locked. I twisted it the other way and tried the handle. It opened.

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Lying in bed this morning, I clutched the cold key in my fist. I was trying to read a book on Freud under the bedclothes but I was far too excited to concentrate alan had already gone out to visit his publisher and I was impatiently waiting for margaret to make her usual assignation with dr. smythe and leave too. My fingers itched to feel those cool, smooth keys responding to my will.

margaret marched into my bedroom. I could tell she meant business so I put on the special blank look I had perfected specially for her.

"You must have a sleep now, MAISIE" she snapped. I had woken up at ten past nine that morning and as it was only eleven o clock now I was damned if I was going to sleep again.I realized that dr. smythe must be coming to visit margaret at home which he sometimes did. Of course he had the perfect excuse because everyone thought he was coming to see me. It would be very difficult for me to creep down to the study with those two still in the house. I decided that mutiny was probably not the best policy so i lay down, the edges of my book under the covers digging sharply into my ribs. margaret went out of the room and shut the door behind her, so I sat up and, reaching for a small, shell-shaped hand mirror, began to put lash-thickening mascara on my eyelashes. I had pinched it from margarets dressingtable.Suddenly I heard her footsteps outside my door again and in a panic I shoved the mascara wand down my pyjama trousers. She was carrying a glass of milk. Not this old routine again. Does she really think Im taken in—?

"Drink this, MAISIE" she shoved the glass right under my nose so I had to take a few sips but Im not that keen on sleepingpills mixed with milk so when she turned away to draw the curtains I tipped the milk away into the chamberpot which I kept under the bed for this very purpose. I yawned realistically a few times and settled down ostentatiously. margaret was obviously itching to get away so I really made a meal out of falling asleep. I would have enjoyed it more but with the key getting hotter and stickier in my fist, my sharp-edged book nudging my ribs and the mascara wand leaving scratchy black trails over my tummy I decided not to linger too long.

Eventually I narrowed my eyes to tiny slits until all I could see of margaret was a slim brown foot in a strappy white sandal tapping impatiently on the floor. Her toenails were painted red. She came and bent right over me and her perfume was so strong I was afraid I would sneeze. I gave a slight, extremely realistic snore. It convinced

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her that I was fast asleep and quietly she went out of my room. Just as quietly I whipped across the room and peeped through the keyhole. dr. smythe was kissing margaret in the corridor she was giving little gasps he was touching her all over then she dragged him into the bedroom and the door slammed. I heard the creak of the bedsprings.

Clutching my key I hurried to the airing cupboard. Stripping off my pyjamas I bundled them into the linen basket. I selected a floaty, frilly negligee in a pale sky-blue shade which suited me better than it did margaret.The silky folds slid over my naked body, whispering softly as I glided downstairs. Bumps, groans and grinds interspersed with loud moans could clearly be heard as I entered the study. At least those animal-like sounds would mask the click of the typewriter. The beige cover was hiding all its shiny black glory. I settled myself in alans chair, the leather cold against my buttocks which were covered by only the flimsiest of silk. I ran my fingers gently over the cover feeling the familiar bumps and lumps beneath. Slowly I stripped the cover away, exposing the shiny, tempting keys. As I reached out to touch them I could hear the bedsprings creaking wildly above my head. When they are finished will they discuss how to murder alan and myself? What should

Not much time today and yesterday I nearly got caught. I was so busy listening for the bed to stop thumping that I forgot to listen out for alan too. Luckily I heard his car door slam. The thumping above my head stopped suddenly. My heart was beating fit to burst as I ripped margarets negligee off and fled naked up the stairs clutching the key and my papers. For a few heartstopping moments I had to rush back down again I had forgotten to lock the door. I was in luck because margaret obviously panicking as much as I was had put her bedside radio on at full volume to cover up all noise they were making trying to get dressed in 5 seconds flat. This covered up all the noise *I* was making,stuffing margarets negligee back into the airing cupboard and ferreting my pyjamas out of the linen basket. By the time margaret had dr smythe (panting heavily) scuttled out of the bedroom I was safely behind my bedroom door. Curiously I put my head round the door.

alan was standing at the bottom of the stairs.He was dead drunk. He looked at the other two in a very ugly way. Margaret was trying to smooth down her hair which was sticking out all over. She had lost one diamond earring.dr. smythes flies were undone and his

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jumper was on inside out.alan called margaret a dirty whore and he slugged dr. smythe so hard that he rolled right down the stairs margaret screamed and called alan a bastard alan shouted that hed get dr smythe struck off and what would margaret want with a penniless dr

the dr. was bleeding all over the hall carpet and margaret was crying and wringing her hands out alan shouted that hed leave her and shed be all alone in the house with MAISIE then I heard the dr. drive away at about eighty miles per hour and margaret came stumbling upstairs so I had to duck inside my door again. The front door slammed and margarets bedroomdoor slammed. So I came down to the study as no-one seems over-concerned about my whereabouts. Someone has to record these events fully.Im sure that now margaret and dr smythe will try to kill alan and knowing how little margaret cares for me I have to face the fact that I could be done away with too.

Early this morning I heard margaret moving about next door. She was opening and closing all the cupboards and drawers. I guessed that she was going away so I congratulated myself on escaping from her murderous clutches. Quietly I slipped outside and removed all her clothes from the airing cupboard. I reckon I deserved them after facing death and living in Oxfam rejects all this time.

She opened her bedroom door and I nipped smartly back into my room,trailing armfuls of stockings, blouses and lacy knickers. I wondered if shed stop and search the airing cupboard but she didn't. Next minute I heard the front door slam, and then I heard alans car being revved up.margaret wasnt allowed to drive it because she ran over sheep and stuff like that.alan wouldn't be pleased. Conscious of a great relief, I decided to go downstairs and raid the freezer. I would cook crispy, red-gold bacon and make plates of buttered toast and eat it all in the study ,sitting in alans big leather armchair. Then I would type and type as much as I liked. In honor of the occasion

I selected a white, gauzily transparent blouse and a grey tweed skirt from my stolen spoils. Carefully I pulled margarets black stockings over my toes and up over my thighs,tucking the tops into my knickers to secure them.On my way downstairs I peeped into margarets room to see if shed left anything behind. The mean old bitch had taken nearly everything but I found a long necklace of black jet which I coiled around my neck several times. She hadnt left any

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decent shoes so I tripped down the stairs in my stockinged feet. I unlocked the study door.

I left the study door open and about two hours later I heard mrs maloney singing downstairs as she vacuumed the hall. Id remembered that she was due back from her holiday today. Im notvery clever but ive got a good memory for dates. she screamed when she looked into the study because alan was sitting inhis big leather armchair quitedead. He had been like that since this morning I had wanted to phone the police but I didnt know what to say.im not very clever you see. so i quietly crept away and left mrs maloney to find the body and phone the police.i just wiped two spots of blood from the typewriter before i left.

The house is very quiet now. All the police have gone. Alan's body has gone. Margaret has been arrested. She was with Dr. Smythe. Mrs. Maloney is sleeping in the bedroom next door. I can hear her snores coming through the wall. Everyone says I shouldn't be left alone. I wouldn't have minded but I thought it best not to argue. Besides I know quite well how to take care of Mrs. Maloney. There's half a bottle left of those wonderful sleeping tablets that Dr. Smythe prescribed for me. I've found they dissolve just as well in tea as they do in milk.

The police were very, very kind. They said I shouldn't worry and that everything would be taken care of.I wondered if they would take me away and put me into the kind of home which is "tailor-made for people like me" (Margaret's words). I don't particularly mind where I go as long as I'm allowed to take my typewriter with me.

I robe myself ceremoniously in a black velvet dress.Of course you have guessed that I killed Alan.His blood splattered the typewriter and I had to scrub and scrub to remove it.I add long crystal drop earrings and slowly coil my necklace of black jet around my throat. I glide noiselessly from my room and down the stairs, mingling with the shadows. I pause before the study door and hold the key aloft, like a prize. Here I had paused with my long, sharp-bladed carving knife.I enter the study and there gleams the huge black bulk,familiar in its monstrosity.The big leather armchair is empty.There Alan was lying dead drunk. I sit down, spreading my black velvet folds around me. I insert a blank sheet into the typewriter's welcoming carriage. I feel the strength and power of the machine as it sucks

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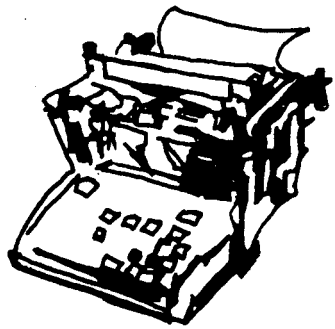
the paper in. Then , like a purring cat, it responds to the slow, delicate caresses of my fingertips.

Mrs. Maloney told the police that no child should have to go through what I've been through,especially one who isn't quite right in the head (I wasn't meant to hear that bit). I don't feel as if my life has been irretrievably blighted. After all, I've only lived thirteen years of it so far so I've got plenty of time to forget all these terrible happenings. And I'm quite a good actress. I think I take after my melodramatic mother. So when I am solemnly asked (as I am sure to be) what memento of my dearly-departed parent I would like to keep (obviously I am not going to require a memento of my whore and murderess of a mother), I shall sniff bravely, put on my best mournful face and say

"Daddy's typewriter please."



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Ian Stuart

The Gilded Truth

"I've booked a table at the Court of the Two Sisters for dinner," Gerald Rayment told Dianne.

Maybe it hadn't been a very clever thing to do, he thought. A lot of people went to the famous restaurant on Royal Street. But who recognized an author, even a moderately successful one? Particularly a British author? Without writers, actors and movie stars would be dumb puppets and producers out of work, but nobody was interested in them unless they'd been married eight times or behaved so scandalously that the papers couldn't ignore them. That was the way life was. Normally it riled Gerald a little, but now he was glad. It suited him that he wasn't well enough known to appear on TV or have articles written about him. The last thing he wanted was to be recognized.

He was being sentimental, taking Dianne to the Court of the Two Sisters, but she loved the place and he figured he owed her that much. After all, he was going to kill her.

She was becoming too demanding. Not for money—for information. He suspected the money would come later. The last time he was in New Orleans she had asked too many questions about the part of his life he didn't spend with her. And she hadn't been very subtle about it.

He had never made any secret of his being married. He reckoned she was bound to figure that out soon enough, if she hadn't when they first met, and, anyway, it suited him for her to know. It showed he wasn't available in that sense, and it let him feel he was playing straight with her.

Until that last trip, she had never seemed interested even in where he lived the rest of the time. He had told her (truthfully) that it was in New York, and (untruthfully) that he was in insurance, and it had seemed to satisfy her. Now she wanted to know where in New York, what his wife was like, and a lot of other things he'd carefully kept from her all these months. Subtlety wasn't one of Dianne's more obvious qualities. Beauty, dress sense, how to please a man, and intelligence of a sort, yes, but subtlety no.

He wondered sometimes if she suspected Rayment wasn't his real

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name. When they first met and some instinct led him to conceal that he was Gerald Randolph and an author, Rayment was the first name that came into his mind. Dianne had played along with him, but she was no innocent.

Concealing his true identity caused problems he hadn't foreseen. For one thing, he always had to be sure he had enough cash on him to pay for meals and so on—he couldn't risk having her see his checkbook or credit cards. But now it seemed that a guardian angel had been watching over him when he said, smiling, "My name's Gerald Rayment," and she, smiling back, said, "I'm Dianne Frankland."

Because there was nothing to link Gerald Rayment, insurance man in New Orleans, with Gerald Randolph, author in New York. Killing her would be like committing murder by proxy.

"Oh, honey," Dianne said, "you know I love going there with you!" She kissed him lingeringly.

"I've booked us for eight o'clock," Gerald told her. "We've got plenty of time."

"Good!"

He followed her into the bedroom and stopped short, as if something had struck him a heavy blow between the eyes. There on the table beside her bed was one of his books. *The Gilded Truth* by Gerald Randolph. The familiar jacket with its garish design stared up at him and his heart seemed to stop beating.

Dianne was doing something at her dressing table and he could see her watching him in the mirror. "Is something wrong?" she asked anxiously.

"No, nothing," Gerald managed to answer. He hoped it didn't sound as forced and strange to her as it did to him.

Dianne turned. "Have you seen that book? I got it from the library yesterday. It's garbage. The author doesn't know anything about women."

There was a strange expression, half challenging, half derisive, in her eyes. She knows, Gerald told himself. Her contemptuous dismissal of his favorite of his own books stung him and he wanted to tell her she didn't know what she was talking about. But maybe that was what she wanted.

How could she know? He thanked God he had never agreed to his photograph appearing on the jackets of his books. The few lines of what his publishers called his "bio" revealed nothing about him

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except that he was the author of ten novels and lived with his wife in New York. So did about five hundred other writers.

"Undo my zipper, will you, darling?" Dianne asked him.

Later, when he was watching her dress to go out, he thought what a pity it was he would see her only once more after tomorrow. Why couldn't they just have gone on as they were? She had spoiled everything.

Gerald had been married to Carolyn for five years and he had no intention of losing her on account of Dianne. He could honestly say, with his hand on his heart, that the idea of leaving her had never occurred to him. He was very fond of Carolyn who, apart from her other virtues, was gorgeously, indecently rich. Her father had been something in commodities. Just what Gerald didn't know—the workings of finance had never interested him. Having that little bit more than enough of it was all he cared about. And although he hardly thought about it any more, he never forgot that it was Carolyn's money that allowed him to live in the style to which he had been delighted to become accustomed.

But not to pay for Dianne. His conscience might not be very highly developed, but he drew the line there. Money he spent on her he earned honestly at his typewriter.

They had met in a hotel in the Vieux Carré ten months ago when he was in New Orleans researching his last book. Dianne was perched on a stool in the bar alone. She was five-eight, with large, dark eyes, long, almost black hair, magnificent legs, and a figure to make a goddess green with envy. It had started casually enough—two solitary, attractive people looking for a way of spending an evening. She told him she was the head of public relations for one of the leading stores in the city. Gerald told her he was in insurance. Before he flew back to New York two days later, their affair was launched.

It didn't bother him that there were almost certainly other men in her life. She was always there when he came to New Orleans, apparently thrilled to see him, and that was all he asked. He was fair-minded enough to tell himself that he was in no position to complain. After all, the affair was hardly exclusive on his side.

To him it seemed the ideal setup. Carolyn and Dianne were very different, yet they complemented each other perfectly. Carolyn was just as beautiful, but in a cool, blonde way. And she was a reserved New Englander. Gerald couldn't imagine her deliberately posing,

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setting out to demonstrate her physical attributes as Dianne did. She dressed just as fashionably, but always with understated elegance.

Gerald sometimes thought that he could say with Macheath, "How happy could I be with either, were t'other dear charmer away." While he loved neither of them—he wasn't sure he knew what love was—he delighted in being with them both. As long as it was one at a time. He could even pride himself that in his way he had been true to them both. But it couldn't go on, the risks were becoming too great.

Nevertheless, as he followed Dianne into the restaurant, he reflected with a pang of regret that this would be their last dinner together. Under the trees in the courtyard, many of the tables were occupied and the candles were bright pinpoints of light. Dianne picked her way delicately across the cobbles.

Gerald was sure she had something on her mind. There was a strange, appraising look in her eyes when she turned to him to discuss what they should eat. Was she going to demand he divorce Carolyn and marry her—with the rider that if he didn't, she would see Carolyn learned about their relationship? He shuddered inwardly.

But Dianne had more on her mind than marriage.

"When's the next time this guy'll be here in N'Orleans?" Wesley Johnson asked.

"Next Thursday," Dianne answered. "He says he'll be on the usual plane."

Johnson smiled. It was a cynical smile. He understood women like Dianne better than they understood themselves. In his work he saw a lot of them.

"Swell," he said. One time was as good as any other, so long as it meant money. Johnson didn't come cheap. He called himself a private detective, although he had no license, and he had been highly recommended to Dianne. Wesley Johnson had special talents. It was he who had discovered Gerald's real identity and his New York address.

"That's okay?" Dianne asked him.

"Sure, lady. You got nothin' to worry your pretty li'l head about," he said.

Dianne hoped he was right.

Gerald decided his alibi shouldn't be too watertight. That might

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look suspicious. At the same time, it must make it seem well nigh impossible for him to have killed Dianne.

He made his arrangements with care. The risk of anyone suspecting him might be almost nonexistent, but he was by nature a careful man and he was taking no chances.

First he told Carolyn that he had to go to Washington for a couple of days, researching for his new book. As he had foreseen, she raised no objections. She believed in husbands and wives being free to live their own lives as long as they remained loyal, and she took little interest in his writing.

"If I take a morning plane on Thursday and come back Friday evening, that'll give me most of two days," he said.

"All right, dear," she agreed, looking up from the latest number of *Vogue*. Gerry had gone away rather a lot lately, she reflected. His last book had needed more researching than his earlier ones, and now he was talking about the next. Her sister Ann had said he must have another woman hidden away somewhere. She had laughed when she said it, but Carolyn knew she wasn't altogether joking. But not Gerry, she thought. He wouldn't.

"That will fit in well," she told him equably. "There's a meeting of the Yalding Trustees Thursday afternoon and I have a women's lunch on Friday."

Gerald looked at the top of her sleek blonde head over the magazine and thought it would have been nice if she had shown a little disappointment at his going away. True, it was for less than forty-eight hours, but it almost seemed as if she didn't care. And, after all, he was doing this for her.

The next day he started putting his plan into operation. First, he went to the travel firm off Fifth Avenue he used when he was going anywhere under his own name. There he made a reservation for Continental's nine-thirty flight from La Guardia to Washington the next Thursday and another for the plane returning at six-thirty Friday evening.

Once it was clear his affair with Dianne wasn't a one-night stand and he was committed to being Gerald Rayment in New Orleans, he had seen there were dangers in his continuing to make plane and hotel reservations in his own name. He could hardly make them as Rayment with his usual agent, so he had started using another firm over on the West Side where nobody he knew was likely to see him. But he couldn't go there either now. He took the subway out to Brooklyn, found another firm there, and made a reservation as Peter

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Wallace on the midday flight from Washington International to New Orleans. It would get him there much earlier than he liked, but there was no late flight out and he had to be back at his Washington hotel that night. He booked a seat on the seven-fifteen plane.

When he got home, Carolyn was studying a report from one of the charities to which she devoted a great deal of her time and energy. Leaving the door open so she could hear him, Gerald rang a hotel in Washington where he had stayed before and made a reservation for a single room for Thursday night.

When he put the phone down, he felt buoyed up. Stage One was complete.

His euphoria didn't last long. He became edgy and tense. Premeditated murder was a serious business, and however often he told himself he couldn't be suspected, let alone arrested, there were times when that seemed all too likely, and the thought of the consequences brought him out in a cold sweat. He slept badly and became moody. More than once, he caught Carolyn watching him with a puzzled expression. She probably thought he had a headache or indigestion or something equally trivial, he told himself. If she only knew.

Sometimes he was tempted to forget the whole plan. He would just call Dianne and tell her it was over, he couldn't see her any more. Not knowing his real identity, there would be nothing she could do. She might try, and he grinned at the thought of the mutual surprise and embarrassment it would cause if she found some genuine Gerald Rayment and started accusing him. The poor man might have to do some pretty smart explaining to his wife.

But it wasn't that simple. There was the copy of *The Gilded Truth*. He had never known her to read a novel before—there were never any lying around in her apartment, and there had been that expression in her eyes when she told him it was no good. She had set out to rile him, because she knew. And she had put the book on the table on the side of the bed he always slept so he couldn't fail to see it. If he thought she would accept the end of their relationship without doing anything about it, he was deluding himself—Dianne would fight for what she wanted. Fight dirty, if she had to. There was only one way he could be safe.

The days dragged by. Gerald couldn't work. He hung around the apartment, unable to settle down to anything for long, or walked the streets. He drank more than was his custom.

At last, the day he had dreaded arrived. He woke with a strange

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feeling of inevitability. He didn't like the thought of what he was going to do, but at the same time he was rather proud of himself for having the courage and resourcefulness to see it through. He kissed Carolyn goodbye and departed in a taxi for LaGuardia. When he returned, his troubles would be over.

Gerald disliked flying at any time, and this morning the weather forecast was ominous. A hurricane in the Caribbean was moving northwest and expected to hit the coast of Florida before nightfall. Storm-force winds and heavy rain were anticipated over a wide area. Gerald hoped they wouldn't extend as far west as New Orleans, his nerves were bad enough without that.

At LaGuardia he went to the men's room twice.

To lower his morale still further, the plane was twenty minutes' late landing at Washington National Airport. He had counted on having plenty of time to go to his hotel, check in, and get out to Washington International well before his flight to New Orleans was called. But when he entered the terminal building, it was already past eleven and he dared not risk it. He took a cab straight to the International Airport and left his bag there.

The flight from Washington to New Orleans was one of the worst experiences of his life. He felt little or no compunction about killing Dianne—it was her or him and she had brought it on herself—but still the enormity of the step he was taking oppressed him like a lead weight. To make matters worse, the effects of the storm were already being felt in the southeastern states and the flight was rough.

"You got a girl waiting for you or something?" the man in the seat next to Gerald asked when they were still two hundred miles out of New Orleans. It was the first time he had spoken.

Gerald started. "Girl?" he repeated. "No. Why?"

"That's the eleventh time you've looked at your watch since we left Washington," the man said. He was about Gerald's height and must have weighed two hundred and eighty pounds, a fat man with piggy eyes and a face like raw beef.

"I've a business meeting," Gerald lied.

"Yeah?" There was no reason why the man shouldn't believe him, Gerald thought. Yet there was something in his tone that suggested he didn't. "You from England?"

Gerald was about to say yes when he remembered that the less

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there was to link Peter Wallace with either of his other identities the better. "No, New Zealand," he answered.

It would be just his luck if the fat man knew New Zealand well, he thought. Maybe he had folk there. If so, he'd want to know what part Gerald was from and ask a lot of questions he couldn't answer. Dislike for his neighbor welled up in Gerald, fueled by fear. But the fat man seemed to have lost interest in him and he said nothing more.

The plane rose, only to drop several hundred feet like a stone. Gerald felt sick. Miserably he told himself he needed to be in possession of all his faculties this evening. Instead he felt like death.

At last the ordeal was over and the plane landed. Pale-faced, the passengers filed into the airport building. Gerald went to look for a taxi.

As it drove into the city, great storm clouds were massing to the east.

"Goin' to be a bad night," the driver remarked.

Gerald nodded. He had learned it was best if he spoke as little as possible.

At Canal Street and Bourbon, he got out and walked the rest of the way to Dianne's apartment. That was another precaution he had planned.

Dianne greeted him as warmly as ever. Gerald wished she hadn't. It would have made it easier if he could remember her as cold and predatory, but she was even more loving than usual. She agreed with apparent delight when he suggested they go to a little restaurant near the French Market for dinner. It seemed she was ready to fall in with everything he proposed. She even agreed to their walking there, and taking a short cut through an alley near Jackson Square.

The storm was moving nearer. At the end of the passage Gerald could see a dim square of light, but here between the blank, unseeing walls it was already almost dark. He walked slowly, matching his pace to Dianne's. Each step brought nearer the most dreadful, most climactic moment of his life. He was gripped by a terrible sense of expectation that was half fear and half excitement.

Twice he stopped to listen, nerves taut, for anyone else in the passage. The only sounds were the quick light tapping of Dianne's heels and the muffled purr of traffic in the distance. "What is it, Gerry?" Dianne asked after the second time. "What are you listening for?"

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"Nothing," he answered. It was true, he thought.

The low black storm clouds seemed to be pressing down on New Orleans. It must be now, Gerald told himself. Decatur Street was less than two hundred yards away. He let Dianne get a step ahead of him, his heart hammering against his ribs. Now!

Clamping his left hand over her mouth, he turned her and grasped her slender white throat with his right. At first she struggled. Her eyes, wide with shock and terror, stared at him. He looked away to avoid that frantic gaze and forced himself to squeeze harder. For a few seconds longer, Dianne was tense, resisting. Then she went limp in his arms.

When he was sure she was dead, Gerald lowered her to the ground. His pulse racing, he opened her purse, which had fallen to the pavement, took out the money, and tossed the purse in the gutter. Then he walked on. It was done. Dianne couldn't harm him now. But he felt no triumph—only a dreadful, overwhelming weariness he knew was partly fear.

When he reached the street, he could hear the plaintive notes of a trumpeter playing blues in some bar farther along. It occurred to him that there was less traffic than usual, and fewer people loitering on the sidewalks. Indeed, they were almost deserted. The threat of the storm must have driven them away, he thought. At that moment it started to rain.

It was no ordinary storm. It was as if the heavens had opened, deluging the city. The rain hammered down, so heavy it was like a solid wall, bouncing off the asphalt and almost obliterating the lights. With it came the wind, tossing away the chairs outside the French Market, tearing down awnings and whipping the surface of the river into angry white-topped waves. At their moorings, the riverboats reared and plunged like frightened horses.

Gerald staggered against the onslaught. Within seconds he was soaked to the skin. Breathless and battered, he had only one thought: to get to the airport. His flight back to Washington left in less than an hour and he must be on it. Everything depended on that, his whole plan, maybe his life.

He looked for a cab in vain.

Then, when he was almost desperate, he saw one coming. Rain bounced off its hood and splashed up from its tires. Without much hope, Gerald waved to the driver. And miraculously he pulled up.

"The airport!" Gerald told him. He clambered in and collapsed into a corner of the seat.

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"Yes, *sir,*" the taximan said. "You sure picked a wild night to be out."

"Yeah," Gerald muttered, doing his best to disguise his accent. When they found Dianne, the ground under her might still be dry and he didn't want the man remembering he had picked up an Englishman near the end of the alley just after the rain started.

It was warm in the cab and his clothes began to steam gently. He looked out at the storm-lashed street. It was as dark as midnight. As black as the pits of Hell. He shuddered at the thought.

Originally he had intended to tell the cabbie to drop him somewhere not too far out, then to walk a little way and take another taxi to the airport. But he would never find another cab in this storm.

The cabbie drove slowly and it seemed an age before they reached the airport. Gerald got out, paid the fare, and hurried into the building, his clothes clinging to him. There were very few people about. "I have a reservation on the seven-fifteen flight to Washington," he told the girl at the check-in desk. He fished out his notecase. The ticket in it was damp.

"I'm sorry, sir, all flights are cancelled," the girl said. She flashed a brief, professional smile. She had had to tell so many people the same thing already this evening.

Gerald stared at her. "They can't be," he protested. "I've got to get to Washington tonight."

"I'm sorry, sir. The airport's closed down as of six o'clock. All planes have been grounded. We hope to resume normal service tomorrow morning."

"I've got to get to Washington!" Gerald shouted.

"I'm sorry, sir." This time the girl spoke more curtly, and she didn't smile.

Gerald spent a troubled and uncomfortable night at the terminal. Part of the time he dozed on a seat, sometimes he prowled round the building. His nerves were shot to pieces. They would have found Dianne's body by now. Perhaps the hunt was already on for him. The first place they would look would be the airport, but he dared not leave here.

By morning the storm had either blown itself out or moved on. The sun was shining from an almost cloudless sky. After a wash and shave and some breakfast, Gerald felt better. Everything wasn't lost yet. There was no reason why anyone should connect the victim of

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a mugger's attack with him. It had been a smart move to take Dianne's money and throw her purse in the gutter.

They gave him a seat on a plane that took off at eight forty-five and landed at National Airport at eleven thirty-five. From there, he took a cab to International Airport, where he retrieved his bag, then another to within three blocks of his hotel.

The hotel lobby was busy, and Gerald was fairly sure no one saw him come in from the street and walk across to the elevators. The first one that came was empty. He rode up to the fourth floor and there took another one down again to the lobby, crossed to the cashier's desk, and told the clerk he was checking out.

"My name's Randolph," he said. "Gerald Randolph."

He was afraid the man would ask him the number of his room, but he only turned and punched a keyboard. The machine clattered quietly. The clerk tore off the printout, studied it, and frowned. Then he went to consult a colleague. They spoke for a short time and the second man turned to look at Gerald. Gerald saw him shake his head, but he couldn't hear anything they said.

The cashier returned. "I'm sorry, Mr. Randolph," he apologized, "it seems there's something wrong with our computer, sir. However, as it's after our normal checking-out time I'm afraid we'll have to charge you for two nights."

Gerald breathed a sigh of relief. That was all it was! "All right," he agreed.

He used a credit card to pay, walked out to the street, and took a cab to the library, where he did some research for his new book. At five-fifteen he made his way to Washington National for his flight back to New York.

Settling himself in his seat by the window, he thought he would never return to New Orleans. Already what had happened there seemed to belong to a different life, a life that had nothing to do with his contented, uneventful existence in New York. It was strange, but he felt hardly any guilt, and the knowledge that it was all over and he could put it behind him for good was a sort of balm. All he wanted was to be home. These last two weeks, the fear of losing her had shown him how much he wanted Carolyn. And it wasn't only her money. She represented what was best in his life, the things he valued most. With a feeling very like joy, he gave the cabbie at LaGuardia his address.

The familiar street was just the same. Gerald found it hard to

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realize he had been away less than thirty-six hours. He paid the driver and, inside his building, took the elevator to the sixth floor.

A uniformed policeman was leaning against the wall outside the apartment. At the sight of him, panic nearly overwhelmed Gerald. How had they traced him so soon? His euphoria of a few moments ago turned to fear. The policeman had straightened up when he saw Gerald. He was a burly man with nearly black hair and a jaw dark with incipient stubble. "Are you Randolph?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"The Lieutenant's inside. He wants to talk to you."

"What about?"

"You can ask him that," the cop said. Keeping his eyes on Gerald, he opened the door of the apartment and called, "There's a man here says he's Randolph, Lieutenant."

A man appeared in the doorway. He was about thirty-eight, medium height, with light brown hair. Beside the uniformed man he looked pale. "You're Gerald Randolph?" he asked. Gerald nodded. "You'd better come in."

Gerald was so frightened he didn't question being invited into his own apartment. He followed the plainclothesman into the living room. "What's all this about?" he asked.

The Lieutenant regarded him levelly. "You're telling me you don't know, Mr. Randolph? Where were you last night?"

"In Washington. I've been there two days, researching a book. I'm a writer."

"What did you do when you first got there?"

"I took a cab to my hotel and checked in. Why?"

"No, Mr. Randolph. We've talked with your hotel. They say you never checked in and your room wasn't used. The first time they saw you this trip was when you said you were checking out this afternoon."

"There's a mistake," Gerald protested. "I can prove it. They charged me for two nights. I've got the slip." He began groping for his notecase.

"It seemed to them like the simplest way. It's not that unusual for people who make hotel reservations not to use them, but it's pretty rare for them to come along the next day and want to pay. They figured you spent the night with someone. What time did you get back here, Mr. Randolph?"

"Just now. I've come straight from LaGuardia."

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"I don't mean today. I mean when you returned yesterday evening. When you strangled your wife, Mr. Randolph."

Gerald's senses reeled. This was some terrible dream, it wasn't really happening. "Oh, God!" he breathed. "Not Carolyn."

Then he saw. It wasn't Dianne they suspected him of killing, it was Carolyn. And there wasn't a thing he could do about it. He had killed his alibi.

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Carleton Carpenter

A Nice Change

"Let me in!"

She lay in bed, not moving a muscle, listening to the voice outside her front door—the voice she knew she couldn't be hearing. And yet she was. The words were distinct to her terrified ears even through the heavily paneled, locked door. The night was still. No breeze swayed the ghostly snow-free branches on the thick stand of trees outside the house.

Inside, everything was deathly quiet. It had been a crisp, dry February day. Even the dehumidifier downstairs offered no cozy hum. The three zone-trol thermostats were set back too far for the sudden, comfortable, reassuring start-up of furnace noises.

She stared at the dark ceiling above the queen-size bed. The dim glow of the nightlight in the bathroom down the hall was the only illumination in the house. That and the red digital numbers on the VCR on the chest of drawers. Staring at it from her pillow she could read: *am 01:22*. She waited, not breathing, knowing the voice would call out again as it had so many times these last two years. "Let me in!"

Urgent, pathetic, childlike. Painful. A gasp followed—her own, as she gulped in a lungful of dusty air. But she didn't stir from her position on her back, her feet not quite touching under the warm blanket and bedspread, her arms folded across her stomach. Although she was warm in the long-sleeved flannel nightshirt she habitually wore, she shivered slightly. And she waited. She knew what would happen next.

She heard the light footfall as he retreated down the steps from the front door. More silence. He would be making his way down the slope around the corner of the house and onto the weathered deck, where some of the planks she hadn't replaced were dangerously rotted—the old deck outside the rec room directly below her bedroom. Were the sliding glass doors locked down there? She couldn't remember. The Dalmane she'd taken earlier made things a bit fuzzy. She knew the heavy velour drape with its big wooden rings had been pulled shut across the rod—it always was this time of year for in-

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sulation. Insulation and isolation. She listened for the quiet steps on the deck. He would be beneath the bedroom window now.

"Let me in!"

Even plainer now than before. She moved suddenly, bringing her hands from beneath the blanket to cover her ears, moaning softly and rocking her head from side to side on the pillow. Why was this still going on? Would she never be free? Why wouldn't he stay dead?!

And he was dead. George was most certainly dead. She was witness to that.

She and Randy discovered the body two years ago when they returned from a Valentine's Day gig in New York City. It had been snowing all day, and as she slowly made the turn off Willow Road and shifted into low for the climb up the long driveway to the house the headlights revealed the horrifying scene. George was sprawled face up in the snow, between the partially filled tire tracks. The snow had stopped. His eyes were closed and there was almost a smile on his lips. There was also a terrible, gaping wound in his belly. She got out and touched his body, hoping against hope, but he was gone. The shotgun blast had ended his life.

She had returned to the car and, cutting off the motor, told Randy (sitting in the passenger seat staring blankly ahead) they must call the authorities. Randy had disagreed, and after much arguing he had won out. He always had the last word. It was nearly dark then. The body should be pulled to the side of the drive and covered with snow, Randy said. In the morning, when it was light, George should be buried in the woods he loved. This was a tragic accident of some sort and should be dealt with quickly and cleanly and forgotten.

She tried to protest, but Randy overrode her every point. She loved George, too, after all, she said. But George felt nothing now, Randy argued.

It was illegal and inhumane not to report it, she cried: if someone else had discovered George, they would call the authorities! But, he pointed out, if some shotgun-happy maniac was out there, why stir up his wrath and have him come gunning for her?

Against all sensible judgment, she finally agreed. She left Randy sitting in the car, climbed, slipping and almost falling, up to the garage, and got out the snow shovel. After she'd tugged George's body off the drive, she piled snow lightly and lovingly over it, and breathed a silent, special prayer. Then, placing the shovel on the back floor of the Chevette, she had backed down to Willow Road,

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which had been sanded, and got a proper start to slew up and around the steep curving drive and into the garage. She was crying now, but Randy was dry-eyed as they went together into the warm house. They would bury George in the morning. Unhappy Valentine's Day.

But in the morning George's body had disappeared.

Now, as she lay listening miserably in bed, she wondered if that was what poor George was trying to tell her. "Let me in. Let me in the ground for a proper burial. End *my* misery, too. I'm tired. I want a proper rest."

Suddenly feverish, she kicked the covers from her. Why had she listened to Randy? Why had she always listened to Randy? Because, without him, there would have been no act, no work, no life? Randy had really *been* the act. He was the funny one. She was just the straight woman, the second banana—the feeder, the foil. The fool.

The act had disintegrated slowly after George's strange disappearance, until finally it simply collapsed and ended. She and Randy had parted company and she hadn't heard from him in over a year. But she knew where he was. And why he had never gotten in touch with her again. She'd always suspected he had some information about George he would never divulge. She knew he had never liked George. She'd tried to get him to open up to her about it, but Randy was as stubborn as he was funny. No amount of probing moved him to talk about it. He made jokes instead.

Often Randy's jokes were much too vulgar for her taste. More than once he'd ruined a return booking somewhere because of his crude comebacks to a heckler during their act. But he was her boss and the star: she worked for him. She even ended up doing all the driving to and from the clubs and theaters they played. When she complained about being tired late one evening after a particularly long trip home, he'd said, "How the bleep can you be tired? I've driven every inch of the way—all you've done is hold the wheel." It was true. He was a relentless back-seat driver. He never shut up while she was driving.

She was glad they'd split up. And she would never believe George had been dragged off and devoured by a wild animal like Randy had said.

She got out of bed and raised the window shade. A nearly full moon cast an eerie light on the deck below. Of course George wasn't down there, she knew that. She also knew what she must do.

Slipping into her terrycloth robe and slippers, she left the bedroom,

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turned on the hall light, and headed downstairs to the recreation room.

The moon, backlighting the closed drapery, showed the shadow of something just outside the glass doors. The hall light from upstairs spilled behind her on the carpeted stairs.

Passing the piano and summoning courage she didn't know she possessed, she reached the drape and in one quick move slid the wooden rings to one side. The shadow, big as a man, was made by a walnut tree beyond the deck.

Breathing deeply, she closed the drape, turned, and went to the door leading into the other part of the basement where the washer, dryer, and old wood-burning furnace were. As she approached the kindling box, she thought, What I don't need in this house is Randy. She lifted the lid, took the dummy out, opened the furnace door, and tossed him in.

I'm burying my past, she thought. What I *do* need in this house is another cat like George. I'll call the animal shelter in the morning.

As she left the furnace room, she distinctly heard, "Let me out!"

It was a nice change.

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Peter Corris

Mother's Boy

It was one of those fifty-fifty days in Sydney: half the sky was grey, half was blue, and it might rain or the temperature might hit thirty. Just then, in my office, which has spare lines as to furniture and a draught under the door, it wasn't hot but my client was sweating. Mr. Matthews was the sweaty type—his suit was a bit tight for his early middle-age spread; he carried too much flesh to be comfortable except perhaps in the bath or in bed. Still, there were no holes in his shoes and he was my first client in eight days.

"He's like a leech, Mr. Hardy," he said. "Like a vampire."

The two descriptions didn't line up for me. Did he mean something sluglike and fat or a sleeker, classier bloodsucker? But I got the idea and he was the client, he could use whatever similes he liked. It was his old mum he was worried about.

"I've been told you're good," he said nervously. "I mean—"

"You mean I won't blackmail you?" I said. "That's right. I'm no good at blackmail—I can never find the right words in the newspapers to make up the threatening letter."

His hands were pale and puffy, and he clasped and unclasped them as if he was practicing handshakes. He looked even more nervous than before—nervousness is standard in a client, a sense of humor is a bonus.

I sighed. "I'm pretty honest, Mr. Matthews, and I might be able to help you. Tell me more about this leech who has his hooks into your mother."

He looked at his watch and I guessed he was in his lunch hour; leisured clients are a vanishing breed. "My father died six months ago," he said. "He was old, it was expected. He left my mother quite well provided for. She has a house free of debt, his superannuation, and some income from shares and such."

"Do you live with her?" I asked.

"Oh, no, I have a flat quite close. I'm single, but I left home many years ago." He let the words hang there for a bit, awkwardly. "I didn't get along with my father," he added.

"I see. What was this vampire's name again?"

He looked puzzled for a second—the colorful language he'd used

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wasn't his usual style. "Oh, that was a bit excessive perhaps—Jacobs, Henry Jacobs. He handled the arrangements for my father's funeral—that's how he and my mother became acquainted. He's been dancing attendance on her ever since."

"What sort of attendance?"

"Flowers—I suppose he gets them cheap. He takes her to dinner. It's appalling."

"How old is your mother, Mr. Matthews?"

"Oh, not old—fifty-five, I suppose. She was younger than Father." Again, he hadn't finished, he seemed to have a need to explain. "I'm an only child." He was a man of thirty-plus, still referring to himself as a child. It sounded odd and had a scent of parlors and lavender.

"Tell me about this Jacobs."

He described Jacobs as middle-aged and portly. He thought he might be a foreigner from the way he dressed and mentioned particularly his highly polished shoes. His funeral parlor was in Manly, where Matthews and his mother also lived.

I wrote down the addresses and leaned back in my chair. It creaked dangerously and I came forward quickly. The desk was a bit rickety and the carpet square was arranged off center to hide the holes. I needed the work but I had to give him a few hard truths first.

"I charge one hundred and twenty-five dollars a day and expenses, Mr. Matthews. I also need a retainer of two hundred and fifty dollars."

He didn't blink. "I'll be happy to pay it," he said. "I have to do *something.*" He got out a useful-looking checkbook and I waited until he was writing before asking the next question.

"What does your mother say about Jacobs?"

He looked up. "I wouldn't dream of asking her about her personal life," he said firmly.

Keep writing, I thought, and he did. That would be right, of course. He wouldn't ask her, she wouldn't ask him, and nobody would ask Dad. Clean rooms, neat garden, polished car, and a shandy at Christmas if you were lucky. It wasn't exciting—it was drawn-blinds stuff, a high hedge and a smile for the neighbors—but it has compensations, it can make for very healthy building-society accounts. I gave him a businesslike thrust. "Do you know anything about Jacobs' business associates?"

"Not really. He has a solicitor crony who has an office nearby. He's introduced my mother to him. I'm very worried about it."

"Why?"

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"I think he might be trying to get her to change her will."

"Aha," I said.

Manly is like a foreign country to people like me who live on the other side of the water. The roads are wide and the hills are gradual; some of the streets and cul-de-sacs have a European feel. Henry Jacobs' funeral parlor was genuinely Australian—that is to say, a genuine copy of the Californian model. The building was long and low with smoked-glass windows and courtyards covered with little white stones. The funeral column in *The News* had told me a show was scheduled for that afternoon. I parked across the street and watched the people dressed in dark, hot clothes mope about while a couple of gleaming limousines disgorged the living and transported the dead.

Jacobs wasn't hard to spot; he had the act off perfect—the slow movement, the solicitude, the Nazilike direction of the underlings. He was carrying thirty pounds he didn't need, looked swarthy, and seemed to shine somewhat from a distance. His teeth were very white and he showed them a lot. After the cortege had left, I walked across the street and strolled past the sanctum. A grey-uniformed zombie standing outside the entrance gave me a hard stare. Next to Jacobs' place was a luxury-car showroom, then a Vietnamese restaurant, and then a nasty cream-brick building which carried a brass plate in front—W. J. Hornfield, LLB(Syd), Solicitor. A fine profession, I thought; my mother had wanted me to go in for the law and my father had thought I'd make a plumber—I'd been a terrible disappointment to them both.

I turned to go back to my car and saw Jacobs, who'd sent his 21C to the burning, coming out of his establishment. The zombie stepped out of a silver-grey Jag he'd driven up, so the master only had to walk twenty feet to get behind the wheel. He drove off sedately and I recrossed the road. A woman who'd been gardening out in front of her house was watching Jacobs' car as it cruised off. I bustled up to her fence.

"That was Mr. Jacobs, was it, Madam?"

"That was him." She was small and old, but not frail.

"Damn," I said. "Missed him again."

"Are you burying someone? Give Henry a miss."

"No, I'm a journalist. I'm writing an article on the funeral business and I wanted to talk to Mr. Jacobs. But that's an interesting comment, Madam. Would you care to add to it?"

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She smiled, and all the lines on her face responded; they seemed to have been etched by good humor. "I might. Is it worth anything?"

"Well—I could pay you for your time. Say ten dollars for a half-hour chat?"

"Come inside."

The house was brick and tile, solid and unpretentious. It was darkish, cool, and well kept without being fussy. She sat me down in the living room and went off to make coffee. When she came back, I had the ten out and gave it to her.

"Thanks." She put the money on the mantelpiece between some china dogs. "Black?"

"Please." I got out a notebook. "How long has Mr. Jacobs been in business here, Mrs.—?"

"Wetherell, Norma Wetherell. Not too long—four or five years. I've been here for forty. It was all different then."

"I'm sure. Why did you say he should be avoided?"

"He's a crook." She put three spoons of sugar in her coffee and stirred vigorously. "A friend of mine buried her husband with him. Lovely man he was—it was a shame. I tell you, if he'd been alive and heard what that man charged, he'd have punched his nose."

I smiled. "Bit steep, is he?"

"Steep? He's a thief. Extra for this, extra for that."

I made some notes. "Umm, he's got a nice car. But I suppose they all make money in that game. No law against it."

She leaned forward. "He's buried two wives since he's been here," she whispered. "Rich ones, too, I'll be bound."

I almost choked on the instant coffee. "How d'you know that?"

She grinned, pleased at the reaction. "Seen 'em—both of 'em. He's got a flat at the back of the place. There they were, shopping, doing the laundry, and then—phftt!" She drew a finger across her throat.

"When did this happen?"

"One just after he got here. The other—let's see—about two years back. Had your ten dollars' worth?"

"Nearly. How do you know they were his wives—actually wives?"

"Notices in the paper. 'Course, he didn't lay them down himself. It's a wonder he didn't, though. Still, I suppose he got a cut rate."

I got up. "Well, thank you, Mrs. Wetherell, that's all very helpful. I won't quote you, of course."

"Quote away," she said cheerfully. "All true."

"We'll see. Just one more thing. Do you know anything about Mr. Hornfield, the solicitor?"

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She was sharp, suspicious at this development.

"Why?"

"Oh, I heard he and Jacobs were partners."

"Could be, the little rat."

"Have you heard bad reports on him, too?"

"No, not a word. But you should see him—he's the image of Billy Hughes, image of him. Little rat."

I thanked her again and went out to my car, thinking that I could probably get more from her if I needed it.

The computer is a terrible thing when it's misused for bank statements and rates notices, but it beats everything for saving the eyes and legs of private detectives. A phone call to Harry Tickener of *The News* won me admittance to the paper's computer room and an introduction to the pimply kid who ran the show. He looked about seventeen, but was probably ten years older. I told him I wanted to ask his friend all about Henry Jacobs.

"Classifieds or news?" His hands caressed the buttons on the panel in front of him like those of an archer smoothing the feathers of a shaft.

"Both."

He did all the things they do—punched buttons, looked at screens, ripped paper, and swore until he handed me a bundle of tabloid-sized printout sheets. I looked at it doubtfully.

"More than one Jacobs?"

He nodded. "Several, and that only goes back seven years." He took a Mars bar out of a drawer, peeled it, and chewed. "Lucky it wasn't Smith," he said through chocolate and caramel.

Back home, coffee and pen to hand, I pored over the sheets and the coded summaries and they yielded up some of their secrets at last. One of Henry Jacobs' hearses had been involved in an accident five years before; Henry had stood unsuccessfully for the local council around the same time; his wife Gladys had been laid to rest aged fifty-four five years ago and Ellen Mary Jacobs, aged fifty-six, had followed her but two years later. R.I.P. Henry was very busy at his trade; there were hundreds of notices of funerals he'd handled—men, women, and children. After depressing myself with this data for a while I found a tiny nugget of significance—a high proportion of the folk who came posthumously into Henry's care had shuffled off at St. Mark's Hospital, Harbord.

I pecked away at the typewriter for a bit, applying for copies of

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the death certificates of Gladys and Ellen and enclosing the correct fee and s.a.e. as directed to Dr. C. P. Hardy, c/o Associate Professor P. J. White, Department of History, University of Sydney. Peter was accustomed to the subterfuge—it amused him to assist what he called the forces of reaction.

Then I phoned Matthews. It was after six o'clock, definitely time for a drink, and I wondered what Matthews was doing in his Manly flat. I had the answer when he lifted the phone—a burst of gunfire and a musical crescendo. He excused himself, turned the sound down, and I told him the gist of what I'd learned. I was hoping he'd tell his mother and that would be the end of Henry. He was too stunned to reply, so I fed this idea to him.

"No, it wouldn't work," he said slowly. "She wouldn't believe me. She thinks—"

"Thinks what?"

"That my regard for her is—unhealthy. I hated my father, as I told you—"

Oh, Sigmund, I thought. "Well, I'd better press on. How's your mother's health?"

"First class. She's never been ill, to my knowledge. Mr. Hardy, do you think she's in danger—real physical danger?"

"I doubt it. Still keeping well, is she?"

"Oh, yes, as ever." His voice changed and a despairing, fastidious note crept in. "She's seeing him tonight—they're going to dinner. Mr. Hardy, I don't suppose you could sort of keep an eye on them? I'm really very worried."

I agreed to do some surveillance and pick the happy couple up at her place at 8:00 P.M. I told Matthews to have a few drinks and not to worry.

"I don't drink," he said.

On that happy note I rang Harry Tickener, who stays at his desk until they turn the lights and air-conditioning off.

"How'd you go with the computer?" he asked.

"Great. Would there be a human being around there who could do five minutes' work? The person would have to be able to read."

He sighed. "That could be tough. Hold on, Martin's here." I heard him shout away from the phone, "You can read, can't you, Martin?" Martin must have replied heatedly, because Harry laughed. Then he said, "Okay, Cliff, Martin's ready. What is it?"

I told him and hung up. He called back fifteen minutes later. It's

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an efficient, tidy world we die in—Gladys Jacobs and Ellen Mary Jacobs had both been cremated.

I showered, shaved, and dressed; dinner, I was thinking, didn't sound like a bad idea. And a man like Mr. Matthews with no discernible vices should be able to afford the tab. I drove back into that alien territory and parked a little way up the street from Mrs. Matthews' solid residence. It had some nice old native trees in the front of its rather wild garden; the front fence needed paint.

At eight precisely, Jacobs arrived in the Jag. He dropped a burning cigarette in the gutter and didn't bother to step on it with his highly polished shoe. He'd changed into a dark suit; his cuffs and collar gleamed under the street light. He was inside for about five minutes and then he came out to the car with a woman on his arm. She was a surprise; taller than her son and taller than Jacobs, her hair was white, she carried herself well, and her face in profile was handsome. She wore a green dress of some soft material and had a light, lacy thing thrown around her shoulders. Jacobs handed her into the car with an almost professional air and we set off for the city.

The awful truth dawned on me as we crept through the city streets—our destination was the restaurant in the clouds where they charge you for the view, the carpet, the mirrors, and the head waiter's aftershave. I couldn't face that.

They parked, I parked, and after making sure they were strapped into their eating seats I went across the road to a serve-yourself place and served myself. The steak and wine were good and Matthews saved some money.

It was well after ten when they came out. Mrs. Matthews was laughing at Henry's wit. His color was high but he looked like a virile, mature man who enjoyed life perhaps a little too much. Mrs. Matthews was no weeping widow—her handbag swung jauntily, she exuded style. It hit me that I knew nothing about her other than what her son had told me. I had that floundering feeling, like a man slipping down a steep roof with nothing to grab onto.

They walked along the street to the Jag, stopping to look in windows, close together, sometimes touching, like two people who'd known each other a long time. I skulked behind, feeling lonely and voyeuristic. We drove back to Manly; Jacobs piloted the big car well, his wining and dining hadn't affected his driving. They went into Mrs. Matthews' house and lights came on. I sat in my car and wished I still smoked. Lights went off, I drove home . . .

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Next morning I phoned Matthews at his business number. A noncommittal female voice told me I'd contacted the Milton Insurance Company. It sent a shiver through me. I'd worked for a series of insurance companies as an investigator; the companies had got seedier and so had I. Matthews answered his phone with one brusque word.

"Claims."

"Hardy, Mr. Matthews. How's business?"

He ignored the pleasantry.

"I won't be able to talk long on this line, Mr. Hardy. Did you—ah—?"

"Yeah, I tagged along. It was interesting. I don't think she's in imminent danger. Tell me, what's her profession?"

"Oh, didn't I mention that? She's a nurse; well, a matron actually."

"Where?"

"St. Mark's, Harbord."

"How long has she been there?"

"Ten, twelve years, I'm not sure. What are you getting at?"

"Too soon to say. You're sure your mother only met Jacobs recently, after your father's death?"

He hesitated. "Yes."

"You sound uncertain."

"Well, I don't live with her, as I told you. I imagined that was the case. I mean, a funeral director—who knows such people otherwise?"

It was a typical remark. Who knows garbage men, sewer workers, lavatory attendants? Somebody does, somebody loves them, hates them. Matthews said something I didn't catch—my mind was running along murky channels with bends sinister and causeways suspicious.

"Who's your chief investigator, Mr. Matthews?" I asked suddenly.

He was surprised. "We don't have one, this isn't a big firm. We use the Wallace Agency. Really, Mr. Hardy, I don't see where this is leading."

"Bear with me. I won't hold you now. I'll be in touch."

I rang off and called Roger Wallace immediately. Roger runs an honest shop and knows how to do a favor for a friend; I almost went to work for him once. After a short wait, he came on the line and we exchanged notes on how well we were doing. He sounded tired so *he* probably was doing well at the usual cost. I asked him a few questions about the Milton outfit and he promised to call me back at my office . . .

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Primo Tomasetti was bent over a sheet of art paper as I came through his tattooing parlor after parking my car out back. I leaned over his shoulder to see the drawing. There was a heart, a dragon, an anchor, two flags, and the word "Mother" all interwoven. The effect was bizarre, like a surrealistic sketch of a Freudian nightmare.

"What the hell is that?" I said.

Primo turned to look at me innocently. "The ultimate tattoo," he said. "I'm going for everything, I mean *everything!* How do you like it, Cliff?"

I squinted. "You haven't quite got it."

"Yeah? What's missing?"

"Hell's Angels, a swastika, a knife for the snake to curl around—come on, you're not trying."

He smoothed the paper. "You're right, you've inspired me." He added a swastika. "Tell you what, I'll put it on you anywhere you like—free."

"Put it on yourself," I said.

His eyes opened wide in genuine shock; Primo would die rather than be tattooed.

I pottered in the office until Roger rang with the good, or bad, news—there was a one-hundred-thousand-dollar life-insurance policy on Mrs. Matthews and the beneficiary was Charles Herbert Matthews—my client.

That left me only two places to go. Well, the sun was shining, the breeze was soft, and there are worse places. I drove the long and winding road back to Manly and fetched up outside Norma Wetherell's house. I marched up to the door, hammered on it, and held my license card at the ready. She came to the door with flour on her hands and eyed me through the fly-wire screen.

"Back again?"

I held up the license. "I'm afraid I lied to you, Mrs. Wetherell. I'm an investigator, not a reporter. I hope you'll answer a few more questions about Mr. Jacobs."

She rubbed her hands on her apron. Some flour fell on the floor and she looked down crossly. "Why'd you lie?"

"I didn't want to alarm you."

"I'm more alarmed by lying," she grumbled. "Well, make it quick." No coffee this time.

"Have you seen Mr. Jacobs with a tall woman—white hair, about fifty, well turned out?"

"I have, she's there often. Real lady muck."

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"For how long have you seen her?"

"Is there any money in it this time?" I produced another ten dollars and she let the catch on the door come open far enough to let the money through.

"Ta. Well. I'd say I first saw her about three years back."

"When the second wife was around?"

She grinned and scratched her head, dusting her wiry dark hair with white flour. "When she *wasn't* around."

Harbord is one of those places that used to nurture tennis stars and swimming champions. I suppose it looks like anywhere else in the rain, but when the sun shines it looks as if God has laid his finger on it. The hospital was in a road stuck high up above the esplanade, the parks, and the wide blue sea. The sea was so blue and the light so strong that just walking along the street felt like being in a movie filmed in Eastmancolor. St. Mark's was a smallish private establishment, built of stone when they knew how to build and painted white by someone who knew how to do it. It looked like a pleasant place to work or be mildly indisposed in. For dying, it would be just like anywhere else.

I parked up the street a little and did a slow reconnoiter. The place was enclosed by a brick fence, head high. The front, back, and one side abutted streets; on the other side, the fence was shared with a house that stood on a deep, narrow lot and a block of flats. The land on which the hospital stood sloped so that it had three stories in the back and two in front; around two sides ran a balcony which gave the paying patients a good view of the ocean. There was a trellis covered with a vine of some sort on a section of the back wall; otherwise the walls were notable for an abundance of big windows.

I went through the gates and ambled up the drive toward the impressive marble steps in front of the building. For a plan I had the idea to engage an underling in conversation, and maybe hand over a little of what underlings don't have enough of. There were patients and attendants taking the afternoon air on the balcony above me as I walked up the steps; the doors swung open automatically and then I was being watched from the reception desk by a woman in a smart blue uniform. I looked around at the spit and polish as I fronted the desk.

"Yes, sir?" She was a thirtyish brunette with good teeth. She looked as if she could head up a cabinet meeting or a commando platoon pretty effectively.

"I, ah, wanted to know if you have a Mrs. Hardy here?"

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"I couldn't say, sir."

"No? Well, my mother is going to have an operation—nothing too serious, but she'll need some care while she's recovering, and Mrs. Hardy writes such good things about the place she's in. She's an old friend of Mum's and—"

The phone on her desk rang. She said "Just a minute" to me and "Reception" into the mouthpiece. I looked around the lobby, which had a spotless parquet floor and a staircase made of the right sort of wood. A set of glass doors swung open and a white-coated man came through, talking to a nurse. He was carrying a clipboard and she was listening hard. A woman in a dressing gown was talking on a telephone beside the stairs. A nurse ran in through the front door and bolted up the stairs, where she almost collided with Mrs. Matthews, who was descending with a stately tread. She checked the nurse and sent her on her way, came down the stairs, looked over or under me, and went out through the glass doors.

I drifted off after her while the receptionist was still occupied. I was hoping to find a cleaning person to charm or an orderly to yarn with but I never got the chance; two big men in white coats appeared at the end of the passage to bar my way. I turned and saw the receptionist making gestures from the other end of the hall. I didn't wait. I marched back and nodded to her as I passed.

"I don't think Mum would like it here," I said.

At the foot of the outside steps, I nearly tripped over a parked wheelchair and then the hospital building seemed to lean down and hit me behind the ear. I opened my mouth to yell and got hit again, in the stomach. I was slammed down into the wheelchair and was moving.

I struggled for wind to yell and move with, but a hard arm pinned me back. I heard the wheels of the chair grinding on the gravel and we made a turn. A man said something in a language I didn't understand and then my shirt sleeve was ripped and I felt a prick and a voice started counting. I went with it—one, two, three, four . . .

I came out of it in a room. It was a very atmospheric room—I mean it had stark-white walls that ran down to the floor from a stark-white ceiling. It had character, that room—even purpose. I was lying on a bed watching a light above me swing just a little, fascinating. I got bored with it after a while and looked around. The room had no furniture to speak of—a metal cabinet by the bed and a metal chair by the window. I stared at the window, wondering

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why it interested me so; I wasn't usually interested in windows, *fenêtres,* so what? Then it came through to me slowly; I hadn't got here by myself and the door to the room had an uncomfortably tight look to it. I got off the bed and fell flat on the floor so I clawed my way back up on to the bed again. It was like climbing Mont Blanc, west face.

I lay on the bed again, but somehow everything was less interesting. I pushed experimentally at the cabinet. Bolted down. The chair would be the same. I'd been right about the window, though—it did have something to say. The light coming through it was broken up into eight-inch squares by the bars. My throat was dry and my eyes felt gritty—love of mankind was not in me.

The door opened and Mrs. Matthews and two big men came quietly in. They stood and looked at me and I lay and looked at them. Then I sat up and waited for the feeling of treading water to stop. One of the men spoke in that foreign language again, so I concluded they were the wheelchair kids. The woman was carrying something she threw on the bed—my wallet; I hadn't missed it, because it isn't very heavy.

"Hardy," she said. "Private investigator, it says. What does that mean in this day and age?"

"What it says, Mrs. Matthews."

She looked at one of the men—who said something I didn't catch. The other man wandered across to the window. I put the odds on my leaping from the bed and knocking them both unconscious at about ten thousand to one.

"How do you know me and why are you following me?" Her voice was nicely modulated with a roughness to it, like a radio announcer who was a drill sergeant at weekends.

"Who said I was following you?"

"I saw you last night and here you are today. That's why you're in the trouble you're in."

It sounded like a pop song, but I didn't feel like humming along. The trouble was, the truth sounded ridiculous—the Amazon needing protection from plump little Charles Herbert? I couldn't think of a good lie, so I told her the truth.

"Ridiculous," she said. "Charles would never do such a thing. You're lying."

I shrugged. She said, "Dennis," and the guy by the window moved across and hit me with a backhander behind the ear where it doesn't show. I fell back on the bed and felt him use that hard arm on me

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again. He pinned me down and forced my head back to one side; it hurt.

"Tell me," Dennis said. His breath stank and a drop of sweat from his shiny red forehead fell into my mouth. I gagged and the pain got worse. I swore at him and he increased the pressure.

"Stop it!" She'd moved forward and pulled at his arm.

Dennis fell back, breathing heavily. The foreigner watched the show with a pleasant smile. Mrs. Matthews said, "Inject him again—we can't do anything now." The foreigner took a syringe and glass bottle from his pocket and mated them. I faked a collapse and let my breathing go ragged. She came close, smelling nice, and lifted my right eyelid roughly.

"He's all right." She shoved her hand inside my shirt. "He's thin, though—not too much." I was pricked again and went to sleep.

They didn't give me enough, I'm bigger than I look. Coming out of it this time, I knew what to expect and didn't make any rash moves. When everything was working properly, I went across to the barred window, which was now letting in the last few rays of the day's light.

The bars were in the form of a one-piece grill bolted into the window frame—the worst way to do it. This gives you something heavy to lever against something fragile, if you can get any leverage. This depends on the bolts. Sometimes they're anchored deep into the wood, sometimes they've worked loose, rusted, or are held firm only by an accretion of paint. Here at St. Mark's we had the latter kind. I took a few breaths and applied some pressure to the grill. It moved. I applied some more and it moved a lot. It was hard work for one in my condition, but I stuck at it. Eventually, I'd jiggled and lifted the grill loose on one side. It was heavy, but that helped. I peeled it back off the frame like unwrapping a slice of cheese.

I lifted the window sash and let the cool night air playing on my sweaty brow stimulate some thinking. I could stay and fight, with the element of surprise on my side, or run. That didn't take much thinking; Mrs. Matthews' friends were big and at least one of them looked canny, and I still had some kind of drug drifting around in my system that might take the power from my strong right arm. Run then. But where to? I had nothing that would interest the cops and there didn't seem much point in knocking on Mrs. Matthews' door and asking for an explanation. Jacobs? Charles Herbert? The names did set me thinking and prompted action. I repossessed my

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wallet, buttoned my ripped shirt sleeve, rubbed my sore ear, and climbed out onto the balcony to sniff the air.

It was after eight o'clock, and quiet the way hospitals should be at that hour—given that they wake the patients up with the sparrows. I sidled along the balcony to the back wall and gave the vine I'd noticed before a tentative tug. Solid like the Country Party vote. I trusted the vine and the trellis all the way down to the ground.

I slunk along in the shadows, made it across to the fence, and followed that along to a back gate. A dog barked across the street as I swung myself over the locked gate, but I toughed that out. Hardy rampant. I tested the physical equipment by jogging back to my car.

I stopped for some medicinal brandy and it was near enough to nine o'clock when I reached Jacobs' place of business and abode. I cruised around a bit, sizing up. There was a section at the back that looked like the flat Mrs. Wetherell had mentioned. I parked up the street, put my .38 in my pocket, and walked back. There were lights on in the flat. Behind that was a garage big enough to house the Jag and a couple of hearses. I rubber-soled it along the side of the garage and looked in. Some street light fell on the Jag, gleaming like a butler-polished teapot.

"What're you doing?" It was the goon I'd seen here before; he was in short sleeves and bare feet now and he held a hammer. He didn't look in any mood for discussion and I didn't feel conciliatory myself. I felt strong enough and angry enough at the mistreatment I'd had at the hospital to take it out on him. I charged and hit him in the chest with a dropped shoulder. He went back against the concrete wall of the garage and bounced off it, swinging the hammer. I kicked a leg out from under him and he went down hard. He'd lost wind when he hit the wall and he fell awkwardly—his head thumped the ground, the hammer clattered away, and he lay still.

I waited in the shadows, but nothing stirred in the flat. I bent down by the man and checked him over in the half light. His breathing was okay, and his eyes looked normal under the lids. I slid him up into a sitting position by the wall—tongue free, nothing constricting neck or mouth, no blood to speak of.

At closer range I could hear music coming from the flat, something classical and relaxing. I imagined Jacobs with brandy and Beethoven—good. I took out the Smith & Wesson and rapped on the door with it. After a while another light came on inside, and a voice came from behind the door.

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"Herb?"

I grunted something affirmative-sounding, imitating Herb's voice as best I could. The bolt slid back and the door swung open. I crowded him and put the muzzle of the gun into the fold of flesh between his first and second chin.

"There's nothing here," he gulped. "No money, nothing."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "You're going visiting."

He was wearing a dressing-gown over his shirt and trousers, his feet were in slippers, and he passed his hand over his hair while he looked down at himself. "Now? Like this?" It struck me forcibly that vanity was his middle name. Just possibly he was vain enough to tackle the gun. I prodded his neck.

"Now. Come on."

"I can't go out like this."

"You look wonderful. Don't make me put blood all over you."

He came out and I pulled the door shut behind him.

"Where's Herb?" he said.

"Sleeping."

I urged him across the street and up to the car. As he lowered himself onto the torn vinyl in the passenger seat, he looked like a bedouin without his camel.

Jacobs put a few questions to me as I drove to Charles Herbert's address, but I ignored them. He jumped when I checked the .38 over before getting out of the car. It was a street that treated its cars to garages and carports, but there was a big Fairlane station wagon outside Matthews' place. There were two letter boxes on the front gate and the number 1 stood out iridescently on the front porch. Matthews had given his address as Flat 2.

I opened the gate quietly and we went up the drive toward the back. When we were almost there, we stopped as a sound cracked sharply inside the house. It came again, and then there was a long thin howl, like a cat trying to sound human. A voice was raised, then I heard a laugh and the sharp crack sounded again. I pushed Jacobs ahead of me and I could feel him shaking. I felt a bit shaky myself.

The commotion kept up, and I moved fast around the back of the house to a door at the top of a short flight of steps. I motioned to Jacobs to stand still. He watched the muzzle of the gun like a roulette player watching the ball and nodded quickly.

The crack again, the howl again—only going up this time, hanging

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midway, and breaking. I went up the steps, wrenched the door open, and stepped inside with the gun ready.

I was in a long, narrow kitchen that had a sink, dresser, table, and chairs. Charles Herbert Matthews, with his pants down and his fat white bum showing, was stretched across the table. The foreigner held his arms and Dennis was standing behind him with a thick leather belt, studded like a dog collar, in his hand. Mrs. Matthews, the angel of St. Mark's, was sitting at the table smoking a cigarette. I pointed the gun at Dennis.

"Drop the belt."

He looked at Mrs. Matthews, who shrugged, and he moved toward me with the belt swinging. I let him come. He whipped the belt at me clumsily, and I moved inside it. I set the catch on the .38 with my thumb and smashed the gun against his cheekbone. He grunted, sagged, and I ripped him hard and low with my left. He went down and dropped the belt. I picked it up and let the heavy buckle dangle an inch above his nose.

"Sit," I said.

The other guy was still holding Matthews, who'd screwed around to see what was happening. There were three or four broad red stripes across his buttocks running up to the pads of fat at his waist. I jerked the gun up and the foreigner let go. Matthews crumpled down and adjusted his clothes. When his face came up again, it was tear-stained but by no means unhappy. He was breathing heavily, his mouth was open and moist, and he was staring at his mother.

I looked at her, too. "Assault, kidnaping, conspiracy. You're in trouble, Mrs. Matthews."

She blew smoke at me. "Ridiculous," she said.

Matthews struggled for some dignity. "What are you talking about, Hardy?" he snapped.

His mother gave him a long look. "So it's true," she said. "I didn't think you'd have the gumption, Charles." She stubbed out the cigarette and lit another. "Well, Mr. Hardy, it seems my son employed you to protect me. Do you think I'm in moral danger?"

I thought of Jacobs outside in his dressing-gown and slippers. "No," I said. "But others are at that bloody hospital."

She smiled. She had charm and force of character to spare. "I'd say that was outside your brief, wouldn't you, Charles?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Jesus Christ! She's been working a deal with Jacobs for years. She fixes it so he gets most of the business that comes out of the

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hospital. She thought you were onto it—why d'you think you were getting thrashed?"

Matthews said nothing. I looked at the two thugs who had their eyes firmly on the Matron—quite a woman.

"I wouldn't be surprised," I went on, "if she helps a few of the old, sick ones along."

"Ridiculous," she said again, but it sounded as if she was thinking hard. She reached across and pulled Matthews gently down into the chair beside her. She patted his arm. "He couldn't possibly have any proof."

Matthews smiled back at her, thrilled at her touch. I felt desperate, like a man playing a game and not knowing the rules.

"She's known Jacobs for years—she probably got a special deal on planting your dad."

It was the wrong thing to say; Matthews shrugged and his eyes slid off to look at the belt in my hand. I felt suddenly sick.

"There's proof," I said. "Jacobs' records will prove it—signatures, names, it'll stink like a sewer."

Then there was a noise outside, and Dennis moved, and I had to talk to him sharply. Matthews was still breathing heavily, still looking at the belt. I wasn't working for him any more, I was working for myself.

"I've got Jacobs outside," I said. "He'll talk—I'll make him." I lifted my voice and called Jacobs in. Nothing happened. Mrs. Matthews laughed.

Out on the street, there was no sign of Jacobs or the Fairlane. I drove wearily toward Jacobs' establishment and was passed by a fire engine on the way. When I got there, a couple of firemen were running about and a few neighbors were huddled, disappointed. The fire wouldn't even make the morning news. Mrs. Wetherell, in her dressing-gown, was part of the huddle. I went up to her.

"Just a little one," she said. "Back of the flat. Office and that."

I worried about it for a few days and then let it go. They'd had a disturbing amount of aggravation and I felt pretty sure Jacobs and Mrs. Matthews would dissolve their partnership. What the hell business was it of mine, anyway? Then the death certificates came—same cause of death with minor variations, same doctor signing. I put them away in the file and wondered why my mother had never so much as given me a clip over the ear.

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Gerald Tomlinson

Slide Show

There were people who asked, "How do you put up with it? Those endless hours in the darkroom. It must drive you crazy." They could see why he enjoyed the other part of his job, the photography itself, but they couldn't understand the darkroom time.

"Actually, I like it," Brad would tell them. "There's some excitement in it, believe it or not." But that explanation seldom made much of an impression. You had to know from experience the appeal of darkroom work. Only another photographer could appreciate the rewards of watching past reality reproduce itself in miniature through the magic of silver halide.

Brad slid the exposed paper into the developer. Under the safelight, the image came up a little faster than he expected, but not so fast as to hurt the print. He wouldn't have to pull it out early, running the risk of greyish blacks. No, this portrait of Mr. Nair would have full, rich tones, the deep blacks and gleaming whites that the sharp-eyed C.E.O. had come to expect. It had to, of course. Otherwise, Mr. Nair would tear the print into four pieces and hand it back to him with an imperious "Try again."

Brad dipped the print into the acetic-acid stop bath, then submerged it in the third tray, the fixer. He waited for about a minute before turning on the overhead light.

Yes, the C.E.O. was going to like this one. S. F. Nair, as critical of portraiture as any movie goddess of the 1930s, would see exactly what he wanted to see in the photo—his weak jaw made strong, his prominent nose de-emphasized, his facial scar hidden. He would see the ordinary, somewhat owlish face of the real S. F. Nair transformed into a distinguished, almost Karshlike image.

"The camera may not lie, but it can sure shade the truth," Nair had told Brad a year or so ago, sipping from the glass of seltzer that he always kept at his fingertips.

"If necessary," Brad had replied. For Nair's P.R. purposes, it was obviously a good idea. The Pennadel employees who knew Nair in person called him "The Owl."

"My public image is important," Nair said. "You may or may not

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be what you eat, but in today's business world you are what you appear to be."

Brad moved the 8x10 print to the rotary washer, and S. F. Nair began drifting in the kind of aimless circles he avoided in real life. Nair was a hard-nosed, no-excuses executive. He prided himself on his ability to cut fat from the Pennadel payroll, a skill greatly in favor now that Pennadel had acquired three smaller food companies, all of them with solid strengths in the marketplace but with an array of overlapping products. Nair's first cuts in personnel were quick and brutal. One vice president who departed angrily on his own called them mindless, to which Nair replied, "Cuts are cuts. Nobody wants the axe. Everybody squeals when the chopping starts."

"But the cuts should make some sense," the V.P. had said. "The deadwood should go and the producers should stay. That's the reasonable way to do it."

"I'm thinking bottom-line reasonable, not kids-in-college reasonable," Nair fired back. "This isn't divinity school. X number of people have to go. That's the objective. It's not a search for virtue and it's not a talent contest. That may sound callous, but random cuts don't raise any more hackles than reasoned cuts. The cutting is what hurts. The judgments behind it don't change a thing."

The V.P. left, but not quietly. He shot off a letter to the Op Ed-page editor of the *Union-Tribune*. "The good guys at Pennadel," he wrote, "are toppling like slaughtered buffalos. The recent wave of firings has very little to do with performance, or service to the company, or marketing savvy, or any other supposed virtue. It's a result of the merger mania that has changed Pennadel from an efficient, close-knit company into a behemoth. To a long-time employee like myself, it's sad to watch the frantic, save-your-skin politics that too often keep back-stabbers in place while sacrificing their victims."

Brad pretty much agreed with that from what he saw and overheard as the freewheeling company photographer. S. F. Nair's supporters were mostly outside Pennadel's walls, not inside. The Owl was much admired by brokers, investors, and the board of directors, but he was feared and hated by the great majority of his subordinates, up to and including the Nair-appointed group vice presidents.

Yet Brad didn't hate him. Brad was perched comfortably and lucratively on the fence. At the age of twenty-eight he held a dream position with the company. Officially he was Pennadel's top corporate photographer, directing a staff of three. Unofficially he was the

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personal portraitist for S. F. Nair. Being out of the chain of command, apart from the contentious hierarchy, he was closer to an uneasy friendship with Nair than were any of the top V.P.s. It was a cozy arrangement, and Brad watched the blood-letting with little concern one way or the other.

S. F. Nair was lean-and-mean personified, exactly as he wanted the company to be. He had a bottom-line mission. Everyone knew it—and they knew that a new round of firings was sure to come. Duplicate warehousing still existed. Brand Y Pennadel products were stealing shelf space from Brand Z Pennadel products. Corporate planners were charting collision-course schemes. Old-line executives were stubbing their toes on newcomers from the acquired companies.

S. F. Nair called Brad into his office and motioned him to a sofa.

"I like that latest photo of me," he said. "Makes me look like a statesman."

"Thanks."

"But that's not why you're here." He took a long swig of seltzer and set the glass down decisively.

Brad leaned forward. The Owl demanded rapt attention.

"I'm having a big budget meeting at the Governor Wilson Inn in two weeks. All the divisions. Everybody. I'm using the opportunity to make some cuts. Budget and personnel. I want you to photograph the meeting."

"Sure."

"Not so fast. It isn't as simple as it sounds. I'm also having your assistant, Dave What's His Name, do a slide show."

"Dave Weston."

"Yeah. He's out buying a storeful of projection equipment right now. I'm not bypassing you, Brad. I want you to know that. But Dave's the AV man, and I've got special assignments for both of you."

Brad frowned. "That's my budget, isn't it? What's the projection equipment for? We've already got more Carousels than Coney Island."

"No sweat, Brad. I want this slide show to be spectacular. Fades, dissolves, multiple images, the works. I want our managers hanging on every picture, every word, every number. Actually, this is more than just a budget meeting. I'm restructuring Pennadel from top to bottom, and I want the message to come through loud and clear. It's a red-letter day, Brad. Blood-red. Heads are going to roll like bocce balls."

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"During the slide show?"

"That's the point. And the problem. I intend to announce all the big cuts, including the elimination of two divisions, during the slide show. That means there's going to be a lot of muttering in the dark. I'm narrating the show, but it's going to be on a recorded sound track. Your buddy Dave will handle the thing on screen. I'll sit near the projector."

"And I'll—"

"You'll photograph it. You'll keep that old Nikon going hot and heavy."

"In the dark."

"As I said, that's the problem. It's got to be in the dark, or practically in the dark. I'm looking for some unguarded moments. Frankly, I don't trust the sons-of-bitches I'm promoting any more than the ones I'm canning. I'd like to get some candid photos of the winners *and* losers at critical points in the show. I want to see their expressions." Nair toyed grimly with his glass of seltzer. "Can you do it?"

Brad sank back into the depths of the sofa. He didn't like the idea. He hadn't come this far in his career to start taking clandestine shots of human agony, or even joy, for a corporate sadist.

"Technically," Brad said carefully, "I can probably do it."

"Hell, yes, you can. You've never messed up anything important yet. That's why you've still got your job."

"Well, this is different. It's nothing I've tried before, and I'll have to research it. This isn't ordinary low-light photography, which is fairly easy. It's more like no-light photography, which I suppose means infra-red. But I've got a different kind of problem with it. I'm no voyeur."

"Hey, Brad, no moral or ethical problems here. Leave those to me."

"Sure. But I'll be a part of it. If my role ever comes out, I'll be about as welcome around here as a skunk at a picnic."

Nair drummed his fingers impatiently on the rosewood desktop. "Brad, this is strictly between you and me. Nobody else knows about it or ever will. Dave thinks you're going to Harrisburg that day. You'll be invisible before, during, and after. You'll shoot from behind the curtain in the main conference room at the inn."

"I won't be able to see much."

"You may not be able to see anything without special equipment,

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which I'm authorizing you to buy. Not on your budget, on mine. Buy what you need, pay what you have to."

And that was that. Brad had his assignment.

Within the next week, the C.E.O. told him which executives to locate in the audience prior to the show. It should be fairly easy. Brad knew all of them to speak to. Four of the seven were being discharged as of that crucial instant on the beaded screen. Three were being promoted. Each was to be captured on film at the exact, darkened moment of truth. S. F. Nair, ever the egotist, also wanted a few shots of himself throughout the show. Brad warned him that they might not be flattering. The Owl said he knew that—they weren't for publication.

The research took a little longer than he had expected. The best technique, it turned out, didn't involve infra-red, as he had first supposed, but the use of very low light and very fast film, with development pushed to the outer limits. It was simplicity itself. As D-Day approached, Brad could safely promise Nair those moment-of-truth shots he wanted.

Brad worked closely with Dave Weston on the slide show. His appreciation of the AV specialist's skills rose day by day. The Owl wanted a wondrous production and he was getting one. Amusing old-time ads for Pennadel products alternated with striking scenic views of Pennadel plants worldwide. Mouthwatering photos of Pennadel foods mingled with inspiring words from Pennadel founders and early managers. Even the pie charts and bar graphs, the sales curves and organizational charts were done with brilliance and panache. Everything meshed. As Dave proceeded, Brad could feel, actually feel in a visceral sense, the power and pace of the presentation. Nair would love it. The money for equipment was money well spent. No one but the torpedoed executives—which is to say, four out of fifty or so viewers—could help but feel a surge of pride in Pennadel, Inc., as the slide show clicked to its upbeat conclusion.

"The guy is a total bastard, isn't he?" Dave murmured as he turned off the machines. "Nobody counts for zip with him."

It was true that the Pennadel of S. F. Nair's dream was no good-fellowship carryover from the past. It was a stripped-down company, an organization in fighting trim, a single-minded, aggresive outfit that, having thrown much of its old guard to the wolves, was now ready to attack and devastate the competition.

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"You've got a great show here," Brad told Dave. "I'm sorry I won't be able to see it when those four heads drop in the basket."

Dave was a thin, bespectacled kid of twenty-five, an idealist, but he had a practical side, too. He wanted more than anything else to be a movie producer and probably would be someday. "Yeah, too bad. That's your day in Scranton, right?"

"Harrisburg."

"Wherever."

"Say, Dave?"

"Yeah?"

"How many people do you think know what's going to be in this slide show?"

"Three. You, me, and Mr. Nair. This is strictly his production. At least that's what he told me. But I'm sure a lot of people are pretty scared about the meeting. Everybody knows more cuts are coming, so I suppose they could jump to the right conclusion without too much trouble. Why?"

"I don't know. It just seems to me that some guys are more subdued than usual these days. Mel Davenport and Cosmo Buonti, for instance. They act as if they know something."

"For that matter," said Dave, "so do Tom Finley and Gary Zale. I think the whole place is on edge. *We* know the names of the four headed for destruction, but I don't think *they* know. Anyhow, those four V.P.s are big guys with dozens of subordinates. There are plenty of people at Pennadel who must be jittery. The warehouse in Erie is going to close. So are the bakeries in Wilmington and Charlotte. That's why S.F. told me to cut photos of them out of the slide show."

On the morning of the budget meeting, Brad arrived at the Governor Wilson Inn more than two hours early. By prearrangement, he used a service entrance and went directly to a backstage entrance to the main conference room, actually a small auditorium. A special platform, reached by a ladder, had been put up behind the curtain for his use. A week earlier, he had made arrangements for the exact level of room lighting he needed during the slide show.

Without haste, he set up his tripod on the platform so that the camera's telephoto lens barely cleared the top of the curtain, aiming down. A special lens shade would prevent the projection lights from fogging the film. Anyone who happened to look up there when the room lights were on could see the lens easily enough but would almost certainly mistake it for a hotel surveillance device.

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A magnifying, periscopic viewfinder allowed Brad to observe the room clearly from behind the curtain. That was important because he had to locate his seven subjects plus S. F. Nair during the introductory part of the program. When the slide show began, he would have to aim his shots mainly by keying on the strong, piercing light coming from Dave's bank of projectors at the rear of the room. The room lights would be too low to help much.

Once he had the camera set up, Brad could go up and down the ladder freely, since it couldn't be seen from the floor of the conference room. Even so, he took up his position on the platform more than half an hour before showtime, determined to stay there through the end of the meeting. It was uncomfortable, but the nature of his assignment kept Brad's mind from dwelling on the torment of his perch. He was a lot more worried about getting the pictures than he was about getting a cramp.

Cosmo Buonti was the first of the doomed four to arrive, and the seat he took, in the exact center halfway between the projectors and the stage, would make him easy to point toward in the dim light. The cue words for Buonti in the slide-show narration were, "Always a tower of strength." Seconds later, the greying, soft-spoken Buonti, a twenty-seven-year Pennadel stalwart, would see the axe fall on his division and on himself.

When it did, Brad had to get the photos of his reaction, then pan quickly to Tom Finley, wherever he might be in the room, since the wipeout of Buonti's division also spelled the end of Tom Finley on the organizational chart. Finley, a brash thirty-year-old with a Dick Tracy jaw, had started with Pennadel out of the Wharton School. Buonti would probably be crushed by dismissal, but Finley was more likely to be belligerent.

A couple of the executives due for promotion, one a young Ivy League male in commodities with a lisp, the other an older woman in marketing with a facelift, entered together and sat side by side. Their position in the room would be a little hard to pinpoint in the dark, but the lens Brad was using gave him a reasonable amount of latitude.

Next he spotted Gary Zale, a tall, balding man with intense grey eyes. Zale was once thought to be in line for the Pennadel presidency, but two dismal sales years for his division had dropped him out of contention and, eventually, had cost him his division command as well. The cue words for Zale in the slide show were, "Hard-driving

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and competitive." Moments afterward, slides flashing like avenging swords, he would be beaten and banished.

Well, Zale could commiserate with his alleged mistress, Sheila Baines, a lithe young brunette from his former division. Zale had taken up with Sheila, everyone said, in the midst of his profit-center misfortunes and, while hard evidence was lacking, there seemed little doubt in the minds of the gossips that the dowdy Mrs. Zale had been displaced permanently by the vivacious Ms. Baines. About the worst that could be proven about Sheila, though, was that she somehow always managed to turn up at high-level meetings like this one without being a high-level employee. This morning she took a seat beside Zale.

Sheila Baines, so the rumor went, had friends throughout the company, owing in part to the influence she was presumed to have over Gary Zale. People might not like her much, the women in particular, but quite a few go-getters in middle management, who were evidently betting on a Zale comeback, took pains to cultivate her. Few of them doubted that she herself was headed for higher rank in the company. Yet no one, it was said, had the slightest proof that she and Zale were anything more than acquaintances. It was all wink-and-smirk speculation, a gossamer creation of the gossip network.

The fourth big loser of the day, Mel Davenport, arrived looking the part. A rolypoly, middle-aged loudmouth from finance, he was the only person in the room who had dressed casually for the meeting. His sweater was rumpled beyond the bounds of informality. His shoes looked as if they had slogged through the Anzio campaign. Well, from this day forth he would be able to dress casually whenever he wanted. From what Brad had picked up through the rumor mill, Davenport was the one victim whose dismissal would be applauded.

Davenport scouted around for a seat. Brad cursed under his breath when he sat down behind a rawboned guy from the Selinsgrove plant who looked like a pro-basketball center. The lens lost him behind the gawky giant. The best Brad could hope for was that when disaster beckoned on the silver screen, Mel would lean out in one direction or the other to witness the final, full-color, public destruction of his Pennadel career.

S. F. Nair, true to his promise, commandeered a seat in the back row near the projector. Dave nodded to him, and The Owl nodded back. Neither of them looked wholly at ease.

No sooner had Nair sat down, seltzer in hand, than the third

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corporate winner of the day, a slope-shouldered lad with a Gay Nineties moustache, aimed unerringly toward the seat beside the seat of power and greeted The Owl like the fondest friend of his childhood.

Now that they were all in place, Brad went quickly over the cues and camera movements, getting the order straight, returning at the end to Nair, the man who had orchestrated the event. Nair was all business as he made his way to the front of the room to deliver his opening remarks. They would be brief, he said. The slide show would carry the message. As he returned to his seat amid reluctant applause, the lights went down and Dave's slide show began.

It held the audience's attention, as well it might, for the next half hour. Brad kept the Nikon clicking, just as The Owl had advised. He moved on cue from position to position, interspersing moment-of-truth shots with photos of the C.E.O., and throwing in a few unrequired subjects for good measure. He could see little through the viewfinder except stabbing beams of light, yet he felt sure the Nikon was capturing what Nair wanted. He had no idea of what good, or what bad, it would do.

From the show's aren't-we-great? beginning to its go-get-'em ending, the executive audience was restless but undemonstrative. A few people moved about as the recorded narrative droned on. But there were no cries of anguish, no cheers of triumph. Lives had been changed forever, but Team Pennadel, now four players short, played it stoically. A slight smattering of applause at the end of the show rewarded Dave for his superb work. Then the lights came up.

And the stoicism ended. First there was a scream. That was followed by a shout, which was followed by near pandemonium. Dave was gesturing wildly. The slope-shouldered sycophant beside Nair, newly elevated, looked as if he was about to be sick in his cupped hands.

The reason for all this commotion was easy to spot.

S. F. Nair sat slumped forward in his chair, motionless, his face a ghastly crimson. His eyes stared sightlessly downward.

"Heart attack!" someone yelled. "Doctor! Doctor!"

"Heart attack, hell!" shouted a baritone that sounded like Finley's, "somebody spiked The Owl's seltzer!"

It was a crude way to put it, but there seemed little doubt that the unnatural-causes theory was the right one. Dave was waving a small vial in the air and shouting, "Cyanide! Look at him! Smell the almonds! Here! Here!"

Brad could tell right away whose fingerprints were going to be

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found all over the apparent instrument of murder: Dumb Dave's. Maybe he should try to warn him. Why not? The S. F. Nair photographic project had expired along with S. F. Nair and no one would have any reason to care if the company photographer wandered onto the scene of chaos.

Scrambling down the ladder and hopping from the stage, Brad joined the throng.

A few of the more level-headed executives were trying to clear a circle around Nair's body. And someone had evidently advised Dave to stop waving the alleged cyanide vial—it was now resting on the seat of a vacant chair at the side of the deceased C.E.O.

Dave stared in disbelief as Brad came toward him. Then, suddenly, he caught on. He half yelled, half sobbed, "Brad! Oh, my God! You've got *pictures* of it, don't you?"

Brad held up his hand.

Dave plunged on. "Oh, my God, you must have! S. F. had you take pictures of the audience, didn't he?"

Stepping closer, Brad said quietly, "This is a job for the police, Dave. There's no need to tip off the killer."

Dave just gazed at him blankly. "That lens above the curtain, it's yours, isn't it? You've got *pictures* of this!"

At that, Brad turned on his heel and headed for the stage. He jumped onto it, scrambled up the ladder, grabbed the Nikon still on its tripod, clambered down the ladder, strode offstage to the rear, out the service-entrance door, and into the parking lot.

Unless his skills had failed him utterly today, he knew, as surely as he knew his F-stops, that the Nikon held tangible evidence of murder. Any way you figured it, the sequence of shots he'd made was all but certain to reveal the identity of the killer. Brad knew it. Dave had realized it immediately in the midst of his panic. And now, thanks to Dave, the killer knew it, too.

Brad flung the camera and tripod in the back seat of his BMW, swung open the front door, and slid in behind the wheel. He had two choices. He could drive to the Pennadel headquarters building and closet himself in what the Mid-Atlantic Camera Club had voted "the finest corporate darkroom in the East." (The problem with that choice was that every top executive in Pennadel knew exactly where the darkroom was—and Brad had no idea who among the top executives he could trust.) The second choice was safer.

Two years ago, S. F. Nair had authorized the money for Brad to build a darkroom in his home. "That way you can work twenty-four

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hours a day," The Owl had told him as if he meant it. Fully equipped, the darkroom had cost only a quarter of the amount spent on Pennadel's headquarters darkroom, but even so, as S.F. Nair noted when he saw it, it must rank as the second finest of its kind in the East. More important, none of the other executives had been there or knew where it was. Since his phone number was unlisted, they would have to check company records to find his address.

This home darkroom, along with the skylight studio he had built a few months earlier, had proved helpful to Brad at the time of his divorce. Although his ex-wife received plenty of other compensation, he was allowed to keep the house because of its connection to his work. It was a small split-level house on a quiet street in a semi-rural area, not easy to find even with good directions. Brad figured he had plenty of time to process the film before any unwanted visitor would be able to locate him.

Just after noon, he pulled the BMW into the driveway, braked, and headed for the house. The processing wouldn't take long, but he would have to view all the negatives, then print at least one of them before learning who had administered the fatal cyanide. There was a slim chance that he still might not know, that even his wide assortment of shots would not have caught the killer.

After a few moments in darkness, he had the developing tank loaded. He then switched on the overhead light and went smoothly through the stages of processing, pushing the film speed higher than he ever had before. He refused to hurry. Perfectionism was too ingrained in him. What he was doing was too important to rush. At this point, a mistake would be ruinous, and Brad seldom made mistakes, not even minor ones.

In less than an hour from the time he had left the Governor Wilson Inn, he was ready to take the lid off the developing tank. At first, as always, he would glance to see that the film was properly processed, not unreel it fully, since that made it almost impossible to rewind for the rest of the fixing-and-washing time. The film looked thin but printable. Good. Now it was just a matter of waiting—a few minutes more for fixing, a few minutes for washing.

He opened the small darkroom refrigerator and took out a can of beer. Popping it open, he sipped it nervously. The house was as silent as it always was now that Brenda was gone. There were no children, so there had been no hassle about that. He finished the beer and tossed the can in the wastebasket.

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He unreeled the film quickly, without examining it. Then he squeegeed it, again without looking. After that, he began to go over the negatives, frame by frame, viewing them against a fluorescent tube above the bench. S. F. Nair would have been delighted once again with Brad's work. Not a lot of detail was visible in the tiny format, but Brad could see enough to know he had succeeded in his assignment. The images were there, ready for printing. He was a little off center on Buonti and too low with Davenport, but both were visible. He was right on target, not surprisingly, with the Nair shots.

And then he saw it. On the third sequence of S. F. Nair photos, an out-of-place figure appeared behind The Owl's right shoulder. The top of the figure's head was cut off, but the lower part of the face was intact. Who was it? The image was too small to identify.

The other negatives would have to wait. This one required immediate printing—this one held the answer.

Brad clipped a four-frame section from the roll. The looming figure showed in one of the central two negatives.

He poured the chemicals for printing, going through the familiar motions automatically. He inserted the negative in the enlarger, focused the lens, took an exposure reading.

He tried not to think about the enlarged image he saw on the easel. No, he told himself. It couldn't be.

He slid the exposed paper into the developer. Under the safelight, the picture came up clearly. S. F. Nair, expressionless, was gazing straight ahead. It was an honest, unflattering photo of the late C.E.O.

An arm behind Nair was extended toward his glass of seltzer, a hand poised over it. The lower part of a person's face, all but the forehead and hair, stood out clearly behind him as sharp as if it had been taken in broad daylight.

Dave Weston.

Brad kicked the wastebasket, sending the plastic container and its contents flying. He walked to the refrigerator and took out a second can of beer. Sinking down onto the darkroom stool, he examined the print again. The Owl's worst enemy—Dave Weston. Who would have thought it? Certainly not The Owl. Certainly not Brad.

With that one photo, Terry Sage, the county prosecutor, could send idealistic Dave, stupid Dave, to the gas chamber. And Sage would probably find a way to do it even without the photo.

Well, Brad decided as he neared the end of the beer, that's the

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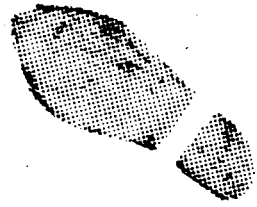
way Sage would have to do it. He pulled the enlargement from the fixer and cut it into tiny bits. He slashed the film into quarter-frame pieces. Then he went upstairs and flushed the bits and pieces down the toilet. End of assignment. So long, evidence.

On the way back to the Governor Wilson Inn, he went over his story again and again. There was no reason for anybody to disbelieve it, he kept telling himself. The only one who might have doubts would be Dave. He remembered Dave saying to him once, almost in awe, "You never mess up, Brad. You never mess up an assignment. It's uncanny. Everybody else messes up sometimes. But you never do."

The scene in the main conference room was now one of controlled chaos. The body was gone, but the likely suspects were not. Cosmo Buonti, sitting stiffly upright in a folding chair, looked ashen. Tom Finley was indignantly demanding to leave. Gary Zale, with Sheila by his side, was studying the projection equipment with calm resignation. Mel Davenport kept blubbering something about one of the giants of American industry being gone. Dave Weston stood tentatively at the back of the room, talking with the slope-shouldered kid who had made the mistake of sitting next to The Owl in the dark.

When Brad walked in, a hush descended. The fired executives, the detectives, and the uniformed policemen alike turned toward him. Terry Sage was there, too, reserved but no doubt hopeful.

Sage knew, they all knew, what Brad was supposed to tell them. What did the pictures show? Brad looked at the expectant detectives. He looked at Terry Sage and shook his head. He began his rehearsed statement in the most direct way possible. "I messed up," he said.



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Rubem Fonseca

Night Drive

I arrived home with my briefcase bulging with papers, reports, studies, research, proposals, contracts. My wife, who was playing solitaire in bed, a glass of whiskey on the nightstand, said, without looking up from the cards, "You look tired." The usual house sounds: my daughter in her room practicing voice modulation, quadraphonic music from my son's room. "Why don't you put down that suitcase?" my wife asked. "Take off those clothes, have a nice glass of whiskey. You've got to learn to relax."

I went to the library, the place in the house I enjoy being by myself, and as usual did nothing. I opened the research volume on the desk but didn't see the letters and numbers. I was merely waiting.

"You never stop working. I'll bet your partners don't work half as hard and they earn the same." My wife came into the room, a glass in her hand. "Can I tell her to serve dinner?"

The maid served the meal French style. My children had grown up, my wife and I were fat. "It's that wine you like," she said, clicking her tongue with pleasure. My son asked for money during the coffee course, my daughter asked for money during the liqueur. My wife didn't ask for anything; we have a joint checking account.

"Shall we go for a drive?" I asked her. I knew she wouldn't go—it was time for her soap opera.

"I don't see what you get out of going for a drive every night, but the car cost a fortune, it has to be used. I'm just less and less attracted to material things," she replied.

The children's cars were blocking the garage door, preventing me from removing my car. I moved both cars and parked them in the street, removed my car and parked it in the street, put the other two cars back in the garage, and closed the door. All this maneuvering left me slightly irritated, but when I saw my car's jutting bumpers, the special chrome-plated double reinforcement, I felt my heart race with euphoria.

I turned the ignition key. It was a powerful motor that generated its strength silently beneath the aerodynamic hood. As always, I left without knowing where I would go. It had to be a deserted street,

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in this city with more people than flies. Not the Avenida Brasil—too busy.

I came to a poorly lighted street, heavy with dark trees, the perfect spot. A man or a woman? It made little difference, really, but no one with the right characteristics appeared. I began to get tense. It always happened that way, and I even liked it—the sense of relief was greater. Then I saw the woman. It could be her, even though a woman was less exciting because she was easier. She was walking quickly, carrying a package wrapped in cheap paper—something from a bakery or the market. She was wearing a skirt and blouse.

There were trees every twenty yards along the sidewalk, an interesting problem demanding a great deal of expertise. I turned off the headlights and accelerated. She only realized I was going for her when she heard the sound of the tires hitting the curb. I caught her above the knees, right in the middle of her legs, a bit more toward the left leg—a perfect hit. I heard the impact break the large bones, veered rapidly to the left, shot narrowly past one of the trees, and, tires squealing, skidded back onto the asphalt. The motor would go from zero to sixty in eleven seconds. I could see that the woman's broken body had come to rest, covered with blood, on top of the low wall in front of a house.

Back in the garage, I took a good look at the car. With pride I ran my hand lightly over the unmarked fenders and bumper. Few people in the world could match my skill driving such a car.

The family was watching television. "Do you feel better after your spin?" my wife asked, lying on the sofa, staring fixedly at the TV screen.

"I'm going to bed," I answered, "good night everybody. Tomorrow's going to be a rough day at the office."

I was on my way home when a car pulled up beside mine, its horn blowing insistently. A woman was driving. I rolled down the window so I could understand what she was saying. A gust of warm air came in with the sound of her voice. "Don't you speak to old friends any more?"

I had never seen the woman before. I smiled politely. Other cars were honking behind ours. Avenida Atlantica is very busy at 7:00 P.M.

The woman, sliding over on the seat, stuck her right arm out the window and said, "Here's a little present for you."

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I stretched out my arm and she put a piece of paper in my hand. Then she roared off, laughing.

I put the paper in my pocket. When I got home, I took a look at it. Angela, 287-3594.

That night I went out as I always do.

The next day I called the number. A woman answered. I asked if Angela was in. She wasn't—she'd gone to class, the woman said. Judging by the voice, it must be the maid. I asked if Angela was a student. "She's an actress," the woman replied.

I called back later, Angela answered. "I'm the guy in the black Jaguar," I said.

"You know I couldn't identify your car?"

"I'll pick you up at nine for dinner," I said.

"Hold on, take it easy. What did you think of me?"

"Nothing."

"I pick you up on the street that way and you didn't think anything?"

"No. What's your address?"

She lived in the Lagoa area, near the Cantagalo curve. A good address.

She was waiting for me at the door.

I asked where she wanted to have dinner. She said any restaurant would do, as long as it was fancy. She was quite changed. She was wearing heavy makeup, which made her face look more experienced, less human.

"When I called you the first time I was told you'd gone to class. What kind of class?"

"Voice training."

"I have a daughter who's taking voice training, too. You're an actress, aren't you?"

"Yes. In films."

"I really enjoy films. Which ones have you made?"

"Just one, which they're editing now. It's not a very good film, but I'm just starting. I've got time. I'm only twenty."

In the half darkness of the car she looked twenty-five.

I parked on Bartolomeu Mitre and we walked toward Mario's Restaurant on Ataulfo de Paiva. "It's crowded in front of the restaurant," I said.

"The doorman parks the cars, didn't you know?" she said.

"Only too well. He once put a dent in mine."

When we went in, Angela threw a disdainful look at the others

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in the restaurant. I had never been there before. I looked for someone I knew. It was early and there weren't many people—at one table, a middle-aged man with a young boy and girl, only three other tables occupied, by couples intent on their conversations. Nobody knew me.

Angela ordered a martini and I ordered mineral water. "You don't drink?" she asked.

"Sometimes."

"Tell me, seriously—you really didn't think anything when I gave you the note?"

"No. But if you like, I can think now," I said.

"Think," Angela said.

"There are two hypotheses. The first is that you saw me in the car and took an interest in my profile. You're aggressive and impulsive and you decided you wanted to meet me. An instinctive thing. You ripped a piece of paper out of a notebook and quickly wrote your name and telephone number. As a matter of fact, I could barely make out the name you wrote."

"And the second hypothesis?"

"That you're a whore with a purseful of pieces of paper with your name and phone on them. Every time you see a guy in a big car who looks rich and stupid, you hand him a slip of paper. For every twenty you hand out, ten give you a call."

"And which hypothesis do you choose?" Angela said.

"The second," I said.

Angela continued drinking her martini as if she hadn't heard what I said. I drank my water. She looked at me, trying to show superiority. Raising one eyebrow—she was a bad actress, one could see she was shaken—she said, "You yourself saw it was a note written hurriedly, almost illegible."

"A smart whore would prepare all the notes just that way, to fool the customers," I said.

"What if I swore to you the first hypothesis is the correct one? Would you believe it?"

"No. Or rather, I don't care," I said.

"What do you mean, you don't care?" She was intrigued and didn't know what to do.

"Just that I don't care. Let's eat," I said.

I gestured to the waiter. We ordered the food and Angela had another martini.

"I've never been so humiliated in my life," she said, her voice slightly slurred.

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"If I were you, I wouldn't have any more to drink. So you can run away from me if you need to," I said.

"I don't want to run away from you," Angela said, emptying in one gulp what was left in her glass. "I want another one."

The situation, she and I in the restaurant, bothered me. Afterward it would be good, but talking to her meant nothing to me.

"What do you do?"

"I control the drug traffic in the south zone," I said.

"Is that true?"

"Didn't you see my car?"

"You could be an industrialist."

"Choose your hypothesis. I chose mine," I said.

"Industrialist."

"Wrong. Drug dealer. And I don't like that bright light shining on us from the ceiling. It reminds me of the times I was in jail."

"I don't believe a word you've said."

It was my turn to hesitate.

"You're right. It's all a lie. Look carefully at my face. See if you can find something," I said.

Angela touched my chin lightly, pulling my face toward the ray of light from the ceiling, and looked at me intensely. "I don't see anything. Your face looks like someone holding a pose, an old photo of a stranger."

She also looked like the old portrait of a stranger.

I looked at my watch. "Shall we go?" I said.

We got in the car.

"Sometimes you think things are going to work out and they don't," said Angela.

"One man's bane is another man's boon," I said.

The moon cast a silvery trail in the lake that kept pace with the car. When I was a boy and traveled at night, the moon always kept up with me, piercing the clouds, no matter how fast the car went.

"I'm going to drop you off a short distance from your house," I said.

"Why?"

"I'm married. My wife's brother lives in your building. I don't want to run into him. And he knows my car. There isn't another like it in the city."

"Aren't we going to see each other again?"

"It's unlikely."

"All the men fall in love with me."

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"I believe it."

"And you're not so great. Your car is better than you are."

"One complements the other," I said.

She got out and walked slowly away along the sidewalk. Too easy, and a woman, too, but I had to get home, it was getting late.

I turned off the headlights and accelerated. I had to hit her and run her over, I couldn't risk leaving her alive. She knew too much about me—of all of them she was the only one who'd seen my face. And she knew my car. But there was no problem. No one had ever escaped.

I hit her with the left side of the fender, knocking her body forward a bit, then ran over her, first with the left front wheel, then with the left rear wheel, the *coup de grace* since she was already done for.

When I got home, my wife was watching television—a foreign movie, dubbed.

"You took a long time tonight. Were you very nervous?" she said.

"Yes, I was. But it's gone now. I'm going to sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a rough day at the office."

—translated from the Portuguese by Clifford E. Landers

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Ernest Savage

A Little Innocent Matchmaking

Luis Escalera and I got to Henry Mercer's house at eight-thirty that Wednesday morning. We were let in by Mrs. Mercer and directed at once to the basement. She was in tears. She'd found her husband at eight o'clock, she said, and immediately called us.

We went downstairs, and after one look at the dead man Luis went back up and called McVey, the M.E. McVey got there at ten after nine, along with Tim Bailey, his aide.

McVey is sometimes a clown. "My God," he said, "this man is dead!"

"Spare me," I said.

"By George, he hung himself. Look, his feet aren't even touching the floor."

McVey stood on the chair the dead man had kicked aside and studied his blue and distorted face, sniffing. "Booze," he said, no longer clowning. He got off the chair and told Bailey to cut the body down and lay it on the floor. "*Beaucoup* booze."

"How long dead, Mac?"

He bent down, rolled up Mercer's left pant leg, and studied the darkened flesh of the thin exposed shank, touched it, pressing. "Rigor mortis, you street-apes call it," he said. "We scientific types call it the coagulation of muscle protein. But a little harder to tell, Peck, when a guy hangs himself—all the blood puddles into the legs. Maybe ten hours. What'd the guy eat last night?"

"I don't know."

"Good lord, why not?"

"We just got here, you clod." I got on the chair, reached up, and felt the top of the six-by-twelve redwood beam over which the rope had been strung, between two floor joists. The near edge was indented from the pressure of the rope. Escalera was watching me.

"You wan' I go get a flashlight, Peck?"

"Yeah, Luis." I said to Bailey, "How much you think he weighs, Tim?"

"I don't know—a hundred fifty, maybe. Forty. Tall skinny guy, ain't he?"

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The far end of the rope was tied around a six-by-six redwood post supporting another beam ten feet away. This whole house was made of redwood—a famous house in Clausen, a hundred years old, a Nineteenth Century tycoon's showoff house. The Mercer Place, it was known as locally, and I'd always wanted to see it. Now I was—the basement, anyway. The man on the floor was the last of the Mercer line.

Escalera handed me the flashlight and I shone it on the beam. The edge looked abraded, as though the rope, freighted with weight, had been drawn across it, not just thrown there.

We tried something. We untied the rope from the post and threw it over the beam. We had Tim Bailey, who weighs two-twenty, hold one end of it and Escalera, who weighs maybe a hundred and thirty wet, lift himself off the floor with the other. The effect on the beam was negligible. Then we had Luis whip himself around as a man dying of strangulation might. The effect on the beam was only a little more noticeable. Then we had Bailey pull Escalera off the floor on the rope and I grinned and said, "See?"

"Don't count on it," McVey said. "The guy could've thrashed around for five minutes before he died. I don't think it broke his neck, Jeffry. The coroner won't buy it, and neither will Wells."

"You're the coroner, for Christ's sake."

"By George, so I am."

An hour and a half later, Mrs. Jane Mercer was in the sunroom at the back of the giant house, drinking coffee. She was still in her pajamas and robe and her eyes were still wet. Her brother was with her and she introduced him wanly. Michael Weston. He asked us to call him Mike and said he'd gotten there about fifteen minutes after we had. He hadn't had time to shave. He said, "My God, she can't take this." He meant his sister. "Look at her, you guys."

I said, "Why don't we all sit down for a while?"

At five-thirty that afternoon, Luis and I were in Lieutenant Wells' office on the top floor of Clausen's new police building. Wells still yearns for the old building, now a parking lot across the street. Wells hates growth. Cancer is growth, he says, and vice versa: wild, lawless. He should have retired years ago, but he never will—he'll die where he sits, the city burgeoning around him, its incremental crime up around his ears. He hates it.

He'd scanned McVey's preliminary autopsy report and my voluminous mess of hastily typed notes, stuff Luis and I had gathered

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through the day. I knew what was coming and stealthily girded my loins.

"It looks like suicide," Wells growled. "Despite your rope trick, Peckinpaugh."

"It wasn't a trick, sir, it was a demonstration of fact." I girded another loin. "Besides, he didn't leave a note, and he was a writer. A writer would've left a note."

"Not necessarily."

"Probably, though, boss. Publication assured, right? Precious to a writer's heart, even posthumously. He—"

"What kind of a writer, Sergeant? Did he sell his stuff?"

"No, but he worked hard at it, his widow said. Believed in it. Poetry, mostly. But the point is that—"

"What were they living on—that big house and all?"

I sighed. "What was left of the Mercer estate. Not much. They couldn't afford help—no maids, gardeners, etc. She did the housework, he mowed the lawn. She's a beauty—former model, did a little acting."

"So your garbled note here says. What about the brother—this Weston?"

I paused; the battle would be here. "He was what you might call unusually forthcoming. Wasn't he, Luis?"

"Right." Luis wriggled in his chair, as he always does when addressed directly—or even looked at. He's the color of earth and sometimes seems to disappear before your very eyes, a Mestizo art.

"Weston," I recited, "went to San Jose State on a football scholarship fifteen years ago. He graduated and made the Rams' taxi squad, thought he was on his way. But trouble came early for our Michael."

"What kind of trouble? I can't read this garbage of yours."

"Dope—as it plainly says there, sir. He describes himself as having been a happy-go-lucky kid who just naturally drifted into pills and coke, the high life. But then he got nailed for dealing stuff to the team, or trying to. The court gave him six months' probation and the Rams kicked him off the squad.

"Then a succession of miscellaneous jobs, truck-driver, construction worker, bouncer, his sister's agent for a while—she went into modeling right out of high school. Somewhere along the line he got himself a real-estate broker's license and two years ago came to Clausen. Business consultant, his card says he is. He makes deals, puts people together for mutual gain—his expression. Met Mercer

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through one of his limited-partnership schemes. Then his sister's career went into the tank. One tiny wrinkle around the eyes and out you go. She told us that. So he brought her here to Clausen, introduced her to Mercer, and bingo! They fell in love."

"Bingo?" Wells said.

"Bingo, boss. We think that was the idea, central to the plan."

"He told you all this in just one session?"

"Not about the 'plan,' he didn't. That's our idea, Luis's and mine. But he practically dumped his life story on us—like he had it all set to go. Rehearsed."

"What he did," Wells said, "is tell you what he knew you'd find out through routine investigation. That's just common sense."

"Maybe, but why so quick off the mark? If it is suicide—which Luis and I very much doubt—an honest man would just quietly mourn his dead brother-in-law, wouldn't he? But he wasn't mourning, he was playing a scene he'd prepared himself to play. He ain't a very subtle man, boss."

"Maybe he's just what he says he is—a happy-go-lucky kid. Happy-go-lucky kids *aren't* very subtle, are they?"

"Okay, but what about the quarter million bucks of life insurance they got him to take out twenty minutes after he slipped the ring on her finger? You're right, sir, not very subtle at all."

"When were they married?"

"A year ago, about."

"And what do you mean 'they *got* him to take out?' Isn't that what a newly married man does—get himself insured?"

"Our impression is that they made him do it. Our impression is that he was a doomed man the minute he married the sister."

"Conspiracy, you think."

"Conspiracy to commit murder for gain. Not only the insurance, but an unencumbered house worth three hundred thousand, plus what's left of the estate."

"Prove it," Wells said, and ran a meaty hand over the polished skin of his hairless head. He likes to glower and he glowered then. "I give you two days, Peck. Look," he said, projecting himself halfway across the desk, "Mercer was drunk—point-two-three alcohol in his blood, according to McVey. He didn't eat any supper. His wife was off rehearsing a play with her little-theater group, he broods, gets depressed, gets drunk, goes downstairs, and hangs himself."

"It was a brand-new clothesline," I said. "Stiff, still full of sizing. He weighed a hundred and thirty-eight pounds, McVey says. All

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that booze in a body that small, you can't find your nose without the help of a friend. So he goes downstairs and makes himself a very neat noose with a stiff rope and drunk fingers. He—"

"A determined suicide can do a lot of improbable things, Peckinpaugh. And how do you know he didn't prepare the noose beforehand, keep it on tap?"

"I don't know *anything* for sure. But when both Luis and I smell a rat, and hear a rat, and see the trail of a rat, we know a rat's around."

"This rat," Wells said. "Where was he at the critical hour last night—around ten, McVey says? Luis, *you* tell me."

Escalera wriggled. "Home, he says, Lieutenant. But I doan know. He drives thees white 'seventy-nine Corvette with a busted muffler. Neighbor said she would've heard it if it moved, it makes a hell of a racket. But what is it—maybe fifteen-, twenty-minute walk to the Mercer place? He could've walked, Lieutenant, I doan know."

Wells stared at Escalera. He always stares at Escalera, watches him vanish before his eyes.

"He lives in a dump," I said, "and drives a junky car. This big wheeler-dealer, this 'business-consultant,' this *rat.*"

"What time did the wife get home last night?"

"Eleven-thirty. She was at rehearsal from seven o'clock on. Confirmed by six or seven people. She's the star—in a revival of *Rain.* Sadie Thompson. She says she looked into Mercer's room and thought he was asleep. Separate bedrooms yet, after only twelve delightful months of wedded bliss. She says she went straight to bed, straight to sleep, exhausted. I asked her if she didn't by any chance step into the kitchen for a bite to eat—I mean, after four or five hours of tough rehearsal it would be a normal thing to do. If she had, she would've seen the basement door open and the light on below, which is what clued her in this morning. She went down this morning, she says, took a look, and then called us. Distraught, tears streaming down her lovely cheeks when we got there."

"Not improbable, is it?" Wells growled. "The suicide theory's not improbable, either, is it? You guys want it to be murder, you got work to do. Me, I want the file closed in two days, whatever it is. Mercer's still a big name around this town and unless we get it right, and get it right fast, there's gonna be a large smell. You got that?"

"Yessir," I said. It was a dismissal, and none too soon. It was almost six, and I had a date to pick up Bonny Johnson at seven and

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take her over to her mother's house for dinner. My week's culinary high. Martha Johnson's not only the world's greatest future mother-in-law, she's Clausen's classiest cook.

In the squadroom, Luis said, "Maybe we should've told him, Peck."

"No, Luis, no way. As evidence, it's inadmissible, and you know how Wells is about that."

"But, Peck, it makes a difference!"

"I know it does, damnit."

Luis Escalera and I have worked together for five or six years now, and we sometimes prowl each other's heads. This morning at ten-thirty or so, he stood up in Mercer's sunroom and said he'd better go check the car radio. I nodded. We were about ready to leave anyway, but I stayed on another few minutes before following in his trail. Meanwhile, he'd sneaked around the outside of the house and stationed himself outside an open sunroom window, screened by a bush. I waited in the car, and when he joined me he told me what he'd seen and heard after I left the room.

Jane Mercer had said to her brother, "Oh, Mike, darling, this has been the hardest day of my life."

"I know," he'd said, "but the first shock's the worst, Janey, it'll be easy from here on." Then he'd taken her in his arms and kissed her on the mouth—a lingering kiss, a lover's kiss.

Anyway, we knew, even if Wells didn't.

I told Luis I'd see him tomorrow, and he said he'd call L.A. before he left and to say hello to Bonny.

He was awed by her, even though I claim I'm not.

"Martha," I said, "I won't ask you what it is I'm eating as long as you promise I'll live until the morning."

"You like it, Jeffry?"

"It's the sort of thing you're willing to die for." I took another mouthful and grinned like the ape McVey said I was.

"About living until the morning," Bonny said, "I wouldn't be too sure about that, Peckinpaugh. You're getting on in years."

"Shame," her mother said.

"Martha," I said, "how come did a petite and lovely broad like you produce this giant beast of a daughter?"

"A ship, maybe, that passed through the night."

"A Viking ship? Or is that long, lustrous blonde hair of hers a fake?"

"You know better than that," Bonny said.

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"Shame," her mother said again.

Over coffee, I asked, "Martha, what's your generation's view on incest?"

It didn't surprise her—she's almost never surprised or shocked. "Well, as long as you keep it in the family, Jeffry. Anyone we know?"

"Someone I know," I said, and told them about the Mercer case.

"I knew Henry's father," Martha said. "We were on the school board together years ago. We used to hold meetings sometimes in that marvelous sunroom of theirs. He was something of a tyrant, as I remember, and if young Henry hung himself, I could understand."

" 'Young' Henry was forty-four years old, fourteen years older than his beautiful young wife."

"Maybe," Bonny said, "they were adoptee kids—no blood ties. Is she really all that beautiful?"

"As Circe's daughter," I assured her. Bonny taught English Lit and Phys Ed at Clausen High, and probably knew who Circé was. "But I wasn't enchanted. Luis said they went at it like long-time lovers."

"How long did Luis hang around, for heaven's sake?"

"Not as long as I would've. He was properly raised. Adoptees, huh?"

"What kind of a clothesline?" Martha asked. "You could hardly hang a cat on my skinny little plastic one."

"It was rope—woven cotton, probably—and sized, brand-new, and strong. I checked a hardware store this afternoon and the man said they hadn't carried that kind of line for years. Plastic-coated wire or woven nylon's the thing these days. Tomorrow I hope to find out where it came from and who bought it."

"What if Henry bought it?" Bonny said.

"Then the siblings win."

"And you lose."

"Yeah," I said. "I think that's the way I'd feel—like I lost. I didn't like Michael Weston very much."

"But his sister's okay, huh?"

"Sadie Thompson," I said. "Think of Sadie Thompson."

"I wanna see that house, Peckinpaugh."

"It's beautiful," Martha said. "All redwood. Famous."

"And I wanna see her," Bonny said. "I want you to take me there, Peckinpaugh."

"Fat chance, Viking girl. What ship was it, Martha? Did you say?"

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"I didn't and I never will." She shuddered theatrically. "But it was a dark and stormy night, I can tell you that."

Luis beat me to the office Thursday morning. He was studying a picture of Weston, a blowup of his L.A. mug-shot taken ten years ago. The packet of stuff he'd requested last night had just come in.

"Baby face," Luis said. "I mean, he's still got his baby fat. Hasn't changed much in ten years, has he? Give him a shave and he'd look just like this, wouldn't he?"

"Happy-go-lucky types laugh at the years, Luis. But it's a good picture."

"Baby face," Luis said again, and I looked up at him. He grinned. "Ring a bell, Peck?"

"Nah," I said, "it couldn't be. He's this big business consultant—his card says so."

"He was a truck-driver once. Maybe he still dabbles at it. Nights."

I shook my head. "You think so, Luis?"

"A big gringo, they said. With a baby face. What do you think?"

"Let's go find out."

Wells wasn't in sight, so we scurried out of the place, heading for the barrio.

The barrio—it has another name on the map, but that's all it's called any more—the barrio. I hate it, all cops hate it. Luis hates it most of all, but loves it with his blood. These are all his people here. Police cars passing through get stoned, sometimes fire-bombed. Kids learn how to make Molotov cocktails before they learn to count. Uno, dos, tres—fire! Mostly good people here, as everywhere, sweating out a tough life.

"You want the best *huevos rancheros* in the worl'," Luis said as we passed a ratty-looking cafe, "you get 'em in there."

"Peasant food, you called it."

"That's what it is. Eggs, refrieds, onion, cheese, tortillas—you eat a mess of that, you can work all day under the sun. *Campesinos*. Good, strong, wiry guys who die maybe at forty-five."

"All worked out."

"*Si*, all worked out."

We were in his car, a battered old Impala, sprung enough to look like a low rider, true Mex wheels. We were moving carefully, dodging potholes—not many tax dollars spent here. At nine o'clock in the morning it was already hot. It never seems to be cool in the barrio.

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"Mendoza," I said, "or de la Hoya?"

"Mendoza, I think. I got stronger magic with Mendoza."

He made a couple of turns and pulled into a dirt drive that served a beat-up unpainted shack, baking under the sun. It was like south of the border. He stopped, turned off the engine, and said, "You wait here, okay, Peck?"

"Buena suerte," I said.

Mendoza was one of Luis's snitches. He spoke no English. I would be no good unless there was trouble. Sometimes there is.

I sat there watching the house and told myself again, Nah, it couldn't be, our Michael Weston couldn't be their Baby Face, the big gringo who trucked illegals from here to the Imperial Valley. They needed a white man to drive the truck, and a happy-go-lucky baby-faced guy was just the ticket, right? Luis had picked up the cognomen more than a year ago, but he'd been a will-o'-the-wisp, Baby Face had.

Clausen's barrio had become an illegals' staging point in recent years. They come up from the south one or two at a time and get stored around town until there's a pay load. Then they're trucked north to the San Joaquin Valley, or east to Imperial and turned over to "contractors" for assignment to the growers. It's a lucrative trade, especially the Imperial run, where sometimes marijuana—Mexican gold—or Colombian cocaine comes back with the truck. A real classy business, the brown-slave trade. Weston? Nah.

We've known about it for years, just as we've known about the Mafia for years, but it's tough to pin down, tough to get the hard evidence that cops like Wells insist on having. We've got to play by the rules; they don't. Wells keeps telling us that. It's why they smile at us and we snarl at them.

Escalera came back smiling at me. "It's him," he said, getting in the car. "He took one look at the picture and said it's him. I got him out of bed," Luis said, still smiling. "Lazy bastard."

Sherri Perkins was a woman with no visible means of support—unless it was the way she walked. We woke her up, too, at eleven-thirty that morning, and when she undulated away from the door after letting us in, she was already at work. "Luis," I said, "close your mouth."

"Puta?" he said. He has nice areas of innocence, which I admire, and a terrific respect for women.

I'd talked to her yesterday, he hadn't, and I hadn't told him how

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she earned her bread. She lived in the apartment next to Weston's and had learned to hate his unmufflered Corvette. When she returned from her bedroom, berobed, I asked her if Weston was ever gone overnight—and, in particular, was he gone last Friday night. She said she thought so.

"Try to be sure," I said. "You're sort of a night person yourself, so try to be sure."

"Okay, I'm sure," she said, firing up a brown-paper cigarette. "Yeah, I'm sure. I had a kinda late party going—"

Mendoza had told Luis that the baby-faced gringo had delivered a load last Friday night but didn't know when the next one was scheduled. He said nobody knows until it happens, but it's often weekend nights because of the heavier traffic. They like the cover of heavy traffic.

Luis and I exchanged a glance. Miss Perkins' testimony wouldn't please Wells—but what did we have that would? She released a giant yawn and I told her to go back to bed.

Outside, Luis said firmly, "Puta." Putas sadden him.

Jane Mercer's eyes were full of alarm as she let me in her house Thursday afternoon and led me back to the sunroom. A kind of sanctuary, that room—she seemed to flee to it. She was wearing a black pantsuit and a high-necked white blouse. She had a black ribbon in her hair.

I said, "Are you in mourning, Mrs. Mercer?"

"Shouldn't I be, Mr. Peckinpaugh?"

"It depends on how you feel," I said. "Where's your brother?"

"He's not here." She sat down in a wicker chair and closed her fear-laden eyes. "Besides, he's not my brother—not my blood brother."

I nodded—and smiled one for Bonny. "I didn't think so," I said. "You were adopted."

"Yes."

"Why do you tell me now?"

"Because I think I want you to know. I don't generally tell people."

"But now it's awkward."

"It's always been awkward," she said and fell silent for a long half minute. Then: "We didn't know it for ten years, and then Dad told us. Mother had just died of cancer and Dad had had his first heart attack." She raised her lovely eyes with recall and stared across the room. "It changed things," she said. "It put distance between us. We

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were afraid to touch one another, we were like strangers. But I adored him—I mean as a big brother, I adored him."

"That's natural, Mrs. Mercer."

"And then it changed again," she said. "During high school, we dated other kids. But we really wanted to be with each other. He was this big football hero and very popular, and I was terribly jealous of his girls. And he was jealous of my boy friends. It was awful. He beat up a couple of my dates just because they tried to kiss me."

"And you were—"

"I was pretty," she interrupted candidly. "But pretty isn't necessarily happy, Mr. Peckinpaugh. In fact, quite the opposite."

"You felt exploited, is that it? A thing, not a person."

"Yes."

"And you still do."

"Yes," she said again and fell silent.

The sunroom was flooded with afternoon light. Outside to the left, screened behind a laurel hedge, the permanent laundry lines—plastic—were strung between two metal T-bars. Downstairs in the basement there was a dryer.

"Mrs. Mercer," I said, "do you know why I'm here this afternoon?"

"No, I don't. But I wish you weren't."

"I'm here to put pressure on you, to get you to talk. But I'm not so sure I'll need pressure, will I? Do you know where my partner is this afternoon? He's out tracking down the rope your brother bought to hang your husband with."

She shook her head violently. "Henry hung *himself!*"

"No, he didn't, Mrs. Mercer."

"He was depressed, he was an alcoholic, he was nearly broke!"

"He was also a writer and he didn't leave a note, he was also heavily insured. Where's Michael—*right now?*"

"I don't *know!*" Her eyes were filling with tears. "He was here this morning, but then he left." She dabbed at her cheeks. "He was upset about something." She hunched into her chair.

"You're scared of me, aren't you?" I said.

She shuddered. "Yes."

"Well, don't be. I'm beginning to think you had nothing to do with it, and not just because you're gorgeous. All I want's the truth, Mrs. Mercer. What was Michael upset about?"

"The insurance—something about the insurance. He'd just been to see the agent. He said they weren't going to—I don't know."

"C'mon, lady. They weren't going to do what? Pay?"

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"I don't know—he said something about a codicil. He was in a rage."

"The suicide codicil?" I sat down facing her, momentarily unbelieving. "You mean to tell me Michael didn't know about the suicide codicil, that *no* company pays off on a suicide unless the policy's at least a year old? You mean to tell me *that?*"

It sparked her. "I don't mean to *tell* you a damn thing! I don't know a damn thing about it!"

I said, "When were you married?"

The question surprised her, she had to think about it. "We were married on the fifteenth," she said.

"So your first anniversary was two days ago."

It shamed her not to have remembered. "Yes—I guess so."

"You were rushed into it by Michael, weren't you? It wasn't your idea."

"He—" She fell silent.

"He said, 'Janey, you're gonna marry this cat, it'll save our bacon—or mine, anyway.' "

"No! That's a terrible thing to say, Mr. Peckinpaugh—it wasn't like that at all!"

"How was it like?"

"I wasn't getting many calls any more," she said. "And Michael was—I don't know—in some kind of trouble. He said he wasn't a good bet any more, that he may not be the man for me. He said he wanted me to be secure."

"And to make sure of that he got Henry insured right after the nuptials. Quite a guy, your Michael."

Her eyes flashed.

"You still love him, don't you?"

"Yes." She moved a hand. "I don't know—"

"You're not sure."

"All I know," she said, "is that I've never been able to love anyone else. If it's any of your business."

"It is, I'm not pleased to say. So you married Henry because Michael insisted."

"I told you why. My career was finished—he wanted me to be secure."

"Mrs. Mercer," I said after a moment, "did you like Henry at all?"

"Of course I did!" Her eyes flashed again. "I tried everything to make him happy."

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"Well," I said, "anyway, here you are an heiress. At least you have the house, if not the insurance. What great luck, huh?"

"I don't care about the insurance," she said, "and I'll take no pleasure in the house."

I didn't think she would. In that moment she seemed truly agonizing over a loss. Not Henry so much as some key part of herself. Her beauty exploited, wasted, traded in the marketplace, and finally used to lure a man to his doom. She was knowing all that and feeling all that.

I said quietly, "Mrs. Mercer, what kind of trouble was Michael in? It was big, wasn't it?"

"Yes." She didn't look up. "He owed somebody a lot of money. He took money that wasn't his and lost it in Las Vegas."

"Whose money?"

"I don't know."

"Bad guys, right?"

"Yes—he was frightened."

"When was this, just before he introduced you to Henry?"

"Yes—about then. I could no longer help him."

"Except by marrying Henry."

She said nothing. I asked, "How did he convince you that marrying Henry would get him out of trouble?"

"He said there'd be business opportunities, that Henry Mercer was still a big man in Clausen—a big name. He said we'd all make a lot of money."

"You mean it didn't cross your mind that Michael was involving you in a plot that required Henry's death to get him out of trouble?"

"No, it didn't."

"That he'd have to kill Henry in order to make it work?"

"He didn't kill Henry."

"Then you did."

It shocked her. "I *couldn't* do that!"

"Of course you couldn't. So Michael had to—there's nobody else. The only thing is, he apparently got his timing off."

"Henry killed himself—I told you that. He was impotent, along with all those other things. He threatened to kill himself a dozen different times."

"You'd testify to that in court?"

"Of course I would—it's the truth."

"Would you testify to something in court that wasn't the truth if it would keep Michael out of jail?"

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"I won't have to," she said.

"But you would if you did have to."

"Michael couldn't stand jail," she said softly, and closed her big luminous eyes, damp again with tears.

In the silence I could hear the tick of the distant grandfather clock—time passing away. It was four-thirty. "Mrs. Mercer," I said, "do you know what Michael does for a living?"

"No," she murmured. "I'm not sure."

"What he does is what people make him do. I don't think he has any choice. Do you want me to tell you what it is?"

"I—" Her eyes fluttered half open. "No, I don't."

"They've got him by the throat," I said. "He did a damn fool thing—he took money from people who don't forget and don't forgive. But somehow he stalled them off on the basis of you marrying Henry and on Henry's death producing enough money to clear him. Stalled them off for a year—which must be a modern record. But he screwed that up too, apparently, and didn't wait out the full year. Maybe he couldn't take the pressure any more, I don't know. Maybe he forgot about the codicil. What did he tell you this morning—that now you're gonna have to sell the house, and fast? Is he out putting it on the market right now?"

"He didn't mention the house."

"Did he mention you? Like how's your health, how you feelin', Sis? Got any lumps anywhere?"

Her eyes flinched. "That's a terrible thing to say."

"So it is. How much insurance do *you* carry, Mrs. Mercer?"

"That's none of your business!"

"How much?"

"I have a twenty-thousand-dollar policy—term, I think it is. But—"

"And Michael's your beneficiary."

"Of course he is."

"Is he your beneficiary in general—the house, and so forth, all of which is yours, now that Henry's dead?"

"Of course—he would be."

"How much does he owe these people, Mrs. Mercer? Come on now, tell me."

"*I don't know!* I know nothing about that."

"A quarter million at least," I said. "Plus interest—what they colorfully call vigorish. You've heard of that, I'm sure. What they do, Mrs. Mercer, is take every dime you've got, or can get a hold of,

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and then sometimes they remove a kneecap. You see where I'm heading, don't you?"

"I—no."

"I think you do. And another thing, I don't think you're scared of me, I think you're scared of him."

Her eyes looked blank all at once, the lights suddenly turned off. In an impersonal voice she said, "I want you to go. I've got to prepare for rehearsal."

"You've got to—what? Did I hear you right? You're going to rehearsal tonight?"

"Of course I am. I missed last night. I can't miss two nights in a row."

"You mean the show must go on, huh? No matter what? Mrs. Mercer, have you heard anything I've said?"

She stood up and held herself soldier straight. "Michael didn't do it," she said, "that's all I know."

"Oh, yes he did," I said, "and you do too know it. And I think we can prove it. But that's almost the least of his worries now, isn't it? Maybe you don't understand, or simply don't want to, but he's in a life-or-death situation. And you are, too, I think. For God's sake, lady, wake up!"

Now she looked regal and lovely as well as remote. "Mr. Peckinpaugh," she said in that distant voice, "please go. It's nearly five o'clock and I must study my lines."

She was beyond my reach. I said, "Well, break a leg."

Back at the office at quarter to six, Luis told me about his afternoon, and I told him about mine. Then—because Wells wasn't in sight—we scurried out of the place.

Bonny said, "I told you so, didn't I? Adoptees. It was obvious."

"It would've become obvious even to me, given time. The incredible beauty of the woman put me off."

"She's got wrinkles around the eyes is what you said. Anyway, I want to see her, even if I won't get to see her house. I know where they hold rehearsals."

"You don't even know who Circe was."

"Yes, I do—I looked her up this afternoon. She turned men into swine. She's still at it."

"Maybe you're right," I grunted. "Sooooeee."

"No, that's what *I* say," Bonny said. "Soooeee. The swine just comes along."

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"Wait'll I finish my coffee," I told her.

Bonny instructs in the art of tennis at the Prince Albert Country Club on Fridays after school and all day on Saturdays. The substantial moneys she earns from this she puts into what she calls her Dowry Fund. There is enough in this fund now to make a downpayment on a house in town we both like. But when Martha asks me when I'm going to make an honest woman of her only daughter I say, "When I'm making as much money as she is." Martha says that's a foul evasion and she's right. Sometimes I writhe under the indictment, can't fall asleep for ten or fifteen minutes. But the time nears, for I dearly love the lady.

Now, seated in the back row of the Franklin Junior High auditorium, where she taught before getting kicked upstairs to the Senior High, Bonny said, "Wow—that's her, isn't it, the tall slinky brunette?"

"Yes, that's her."

"She's struggling, isn't she?"

She was. She could project none of Sadie Thompson's fighting demimondaine quality. She had none of it in her, and she was beyond acting tonight. Bonny and I sat there for an hour, and then at nine o'clock the director called it off. Sadie and her antagonist, the Reverend Davidson, were getting nowhere.

The cast began to scatter. The director and Mrs. Mercer remained in the center of the stage, talking. He touched her arm, a comforting gesture, and she closed her eyes for a moment before going regal again, shoulders square.

"She *is* lovely," Bonny whispered, fascinated. "But she's done in, she should've stayed home."

"No," I said, "I don't think she wanted to stay home."

The two talked onstage for another minute, then the director left and Jane Mercer turned enough to look directly at me. Then she walked off through the wings and came up a side aisle to where we were sitting. She said, "Good evening, Mr. Peckinpaugh. Would you kindly take me home?"

"You bet," I said. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," she said.

I went in first and looked around, groping for the light switches as I went. I hollered Weston's name a couple of times, but got no answer. The two women stayed by the door, then we all went into

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the kitchen—not a sanctuary, but where the booze was. She needed a drink, and so did we. Her fear was catching.

We sat around a huge oak table—worth three grand all by itself—in the center of the spacious room. Bonny, always protective, shoved her chair close to Jane's. My chair was opposite theirs, but I stayed on my feet, looking around, a fat glass of brandy in my hand.

"Could he be upstairs?" I said. "There's no sign of his car outside."

"Go look," Bonny said, and I did—a ninety-second tour. When I got back, she said, "Peck, Jane can stay with us tonight."

"A good idea," I said warmly. "Mrs. Mercer, did he threaten you this morning? I mean, in so many words?"

"It was in his eyes," she said. "He didn't say it. But he was desperate."

"The son of a bitch," Bonny said.

"*No*—he's sick, that's all."

Bonny said, "Well, then let's inoculate the bastard and get you to a safe place."

"Could he be," I whispered, "in the basement?" and watched the basement door behind the two women open slowly as I spoke, watched Weston come through it catsoft on his feet, felt the usual *fight-or-flee debate race across my chest, heard myself say*, "Stay where you are, Mike," watched the girls' heads swivel around, heard their indrawn gasps of breath.

He had an empty bottle in his hand and put it carefully on the old-fashioned tile of the kitchen counter. He looked drunk and had another day's growth of beard on his chubby face. He said, "I'd just turned out the lights below when I heard cars coming in. You're *early tonight, Janey.*"

"Oh, Mike," she said.

"You've always had a timing problem, Weston," I said. "What is this—a return to the scene of the crime? To count the mistakes you made? You thought maybe we forgot to take the rope?"

"What crime? What mistakes? Ole wimp Henry hung himself, that's all."

"With a rope you bought? This afternoon my partner found the mom-and-pop store where you bought it just a week ago. Mom said it's been on the shelf for years, thought they'd never sell it—and then along comes this Baby Face. Just like your mug-shot, she said. A lot of people call you Baby Face, don't they?"

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"Henry asked me to buy the rope. How did I know what he wanted it for?" He grinned a sloppy, drunken grin.

"No way," I said. "You're in the soup like a sliced carrot, Weston. How much do you owe these friends of yours?"

"You got me, copper," he said, and raised his hands in mock surrender. Then the grin faded and the hands fell. "Oh, you talk about timing, man—I missed it by four stinking days. Had the date of the application in mind, not the goddam acceptance date, or whatever the hell they call it."

I traded glances with Bonny. Jane Mercer's eyes were fixed on her brother, her shoulders no longer queenly. I said, "Are you confessing, Mike? Do you want me to write it out for you to sign?"

"Confessing to what? You write out 'dumb' an' I'll confess to that."

"You killed him," I said. "You came over here, got him drunk, tied the rope around his neck, and pulled him off the floor over that beam down there. You knew your sister wouldn't be home from rehearsal until eleven-thirty or so. You had plenty of time."

"Prove it," he said.

"Not hard to do, Weston. We know the whole story—from the time you introduced Mercer to your sister right up until now."

"That's a crime, is it? A little innocent matchmaking?"

"The way you did it, yes. Your *purpose* in doing it, yes. Mercer had to marry your sister, and then he had to die. Steps one and two. Step three—Sis here hands you all the proceeds from step two and you're off the hook. Or at least you hope you are. Hope you won't have to run illegals out to the valley any more. Hope they won't take everything else, too—the house, this terrific kitchen table, the rugs off the floor, every damn thing your sister owns—and *still* make you drive the truck, maybe bust a kneecap or two just for fun the way they do. Mike, you've got one choice—give yourself up. The only safe place for you is jail."

"You think that," Weston said, "you don't know jails." His red-eyed gaze shifted to his sister and he took two steps forward, then stopped when I held up a hand and told him to. "Honey," he said, "give me the keys to your car. That's why I came tonight. I've got to go and the Corvette's about shot."

"Michael, no, please."

"Janey, dear—yes, I've *got* to. I'm scared, I'm scared of myself. I almost killed you this morning and I don't want to live with that every day. I *can't* live with that."

"Darling, you couldn't've done that."

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"You don't know that for sure—you didn't know that for sure this morning. *I* didn't know that for sure. I can't take the chance. These guys—you don't know what they can make a man do. But, look—everything else is okay. What's this cop got? A paper house of circumstantial evidence. Put a match to it and watch it go up in flames—you know the courts. Look, honey, I'll write—I'll always let you know where I am."

"Where you'll be," I said, "is in the Clausen City jail. She can visit you there every afternoon."

"No way," Weston said. And then—drunk-quick, quicker than I could get around the table—he had Bonny by the hair and on her feet, one arm twisted behind her back, her mouth open in pain. "Your lady and I go together if that's the way you want it!"

His sister screamed at him, but he paid her no mind—his attention was on me, measuring my intent to kill. And when I snarled, "Let up on that arm, goddamn you, or you won't live to go to jail," he did, and Bonny went with that small movement, his grip on her hair providing a kind of leverage—and he was in the air, his head hitting the edge of the stout oak table as he came down through a cluster of chairs and sprawled on the floor. I was on him in a flash, ready to add a lot of years to that baby face of his, fist poised. But Jane screamed, "No!" and my fist stopped an inch from his nose. He was crying, bawling like a kid.

I stood up and went to where Bonny stood, rubbing her elbow, her adrenalin and mine arcing the air between us before I closed the gap.

Jane was on her knees alongside her brother. She touched his damaged head with tender fingers and pressed her tear-wet cheek against his bruised and unshaven baby face.

Bonny put her to bed, upstairs. Tomorrow the now truly bereaved woman would make a statement, not tonight. Weston had been taken away—maybe relieved, maybe not; maybe safe, maybe not. I didn't know or care. I was weary, standing for a few moments on the front porch under a full moon and a blessedly smog-free sky. "Listen," I said, "you talk about being *scared*. For a second there, when he had your head pulled back and your arm—"

"Oh, I don't know about that, Peckinpaugh," Bonny said. "Do you realize you put that glass of brandy on the table without spilling a drop?"

"I did?"

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"You did. That's what you were scared of—messing up that gorgeous table."

"Well, hell," I protested, "there are priorities, you know. But, anyway, you got to see the house, didn't you?"

"It's a lovely place," she said, and hooked her arm in mine. "And now that Mrs. Mercer will get to keep it, I'll drop in often."

"Yeah, me too—"

"The hell you will," she said.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Did you notice how Nancy C. Swoboda's clever story, "Frozen Assets," ended?

"The *Ashton Chronicle* had a banner headline the next morning: SHERIFF PICKENS SOLVES PRIME CRIME.

Unfortunately, we have something of a headline for you involving our Prime Crimes anthologies that may disappoint you as it does us—and that is that we have decided to discontinue this series of annuals. The series was initiated to widen the market for original mystery and detective fiction, but, strangely and surprisingly, this didn't excite writers' or readers' interest sufficiently. We have, in fact, had to round out this last anthology in the series with a reprint (which follows) from the February 1954 issue of *EQMM* (edited by Ellery Queen) rather than be able to claim first-time publication in the U.S. for every story in the book.

That is the bad news. The good news is that we will be returning to our practice of publishing two anthologies of reprints a year—plumbing the richness of *EQMM*'s past. Our next Ellery Queen anthology, for instance (due for publication in March 1988), will consist of short mystery and detective fiction later dramatized in the movies, on radio, the stage, and TV.

In discussing Ellery Queen, Frederic Dannay once said, "Any book you haven't read is a new book to you. Each new generation is finding Ellery all over again." And so it is with *EQMM* and the wonderful stories it will always provide for our own anthologies and others'—as well as for the rest of the media.

E.S.

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William March

The Bird House

It was near sunset, and they sat in front of the wide, recessed window that overlooked the park, their drinks arranged on tables beside them. Outside, the red-brick building was covered with lush vines of a peculiar brilliance. They thickened the ledges and the ornate, old-fashioned balconies over which they grew and so outlined the window itself with dense, translucent foliage that the effect of the small park, seen through it, was the effect of green in an easel of brighter green. Marcella Crosby called attention to the window and the park at once. "Look!" she cried out with soft excitement. "It's like a landscape framed in a florist's wreath!"

She felt warmth in her stomach, a nervous tightening at the base of her neck, and she took a strand of her straight black hair and brushed it across her lips, nibbling the ends thoughtfully. This was the beginning of a new poem, and she knew that well. She did not as yet know precisely what the poem would be, what emotional direction it would take, but she felt that somehow it would concern an old man who, achieving resurrection in his grave, broke through the earth with his hands and sat up in amazement among the stiff floral tributes that others had placed above him.

The idea so excited her that she spoke her thoughts aloud. Most of us see death, when we see it at all, through the long, optimistic window of life, she said, but in her poem the convention would be reversed, for her hero would look forward toward life from the grave, through the most terrible and perhaps truest window of all—the foolish arranged elegance of a funeral wreath.

The Filipino houseboy came up with a cocktail pitcher. When he had filled the glasses, the guests were silent for a time, staring indolently at the park and the tall buildings beyond. Inside the park, between a flowering syringa and the starched laciness of a ginkgo tree, was a bird house atop a green pole. It was new and elaborate, and it rose upward in setback levels, like the scaled-down model of an ancient temple. There were circular holes in each tier, designed so precisely for size that while a bird no larger than a wren could easily enter and find sanctuary, its enemies, because of the very

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bulk that made them dangerous, were turned back finally, and defeated.

Dr. Hilde Flugelmann gestured with her cigarette holder and said in her ingratiating foreign voice, "It was not the window that caught my eye, it was the little white bird house." She smiled and inclined her head, exposing obliquely the pink gums above her small seedlike teeth. "I think the security of the bird house impressed me because I see terror, terror, terror all day long in the poor insecure minds of my patients. Why, only a moment ago I was thinking to myself that no matter how vulnerable we are, at least the birds are somewhat safe."

For a time they all talked at once, contrasting the security of animals with the security humans know, but at length they turned to Walter Nation, as if some law of courtesy permitted the host the flattery of the final opinion; but he merely sighed and said that all the talk about funeral wreaths and bird houses had put him in mind of a laundryman who had been murdered a few years before. It was an affair which had always interested him, he said, for there was in it mystery, pathos, terror, suspense, and even a touch of that baffling, artistic senselessness which is found in all truly memorable crimes.

He hesitated and glanced expectantly at his guests, but when they said they were not familiar with the case and asked him to tell it to them, he continued: "It happened here in New York, in Harlem to be exact, and the name of the murdered man was Emmanuel Vogel. But let me begin at the beginning, and tell you some of the things the police found out in the course of their investigation. Emmanuel was born in a small Polish village. I've never seen the place, of course, but I've always thought of it as one of those communities Chekhov describes so well: a village consisting of a general store and a collection of houses, surrounded in winter by the traditional sea of mud."

He took a cigarette from a box at his elbow, lighted it, and went on with his story. Emmanuel's father, he explained, had been a poor peddler who went about the countryside with a pack strapped to his back. His mother had been the local laundress. She was a frail woman, and when her son could barely walk he was already helping her at the washtub. She died when he was seven. Afterwards, he had washed, cooked, and scrubbed for his father, just as she had done—he had even carried on her laundry business as best he

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could—but three years later his father died, too, and he was entirely alone in the little town.

"Oh, I know that place so well," said Dr. Flugelmann. "I have seen it, or its counterpart, many times. At the edge of the village there was an old factory with a rusting iron roof. There was a marketplace where the farmers came to trade, and about a mile in the distance, set in a grove of handsome trees, was the big house where the local nobility lived."

She shook her head, sighed, and continued: "I see Emmanuel so plainly at this instant. I see him delivering a parcel of laundry in a basket almost too big for him to manage, and as he moves down the street, away from his home, he glances back over his shoulder. He has rust-colored hair, a long neck, and a big jutting nose. I think he cracks his knuckles when he's nervous, and as he waits at the door for the money he's earned he presses his palms together or twists one leg anxiously about the other."

"My clearest picture of him is in his home immediately after his father's funeral," said Marcella Crosby. "He is wearing a ridiculous little black hat—something hard like a derby, but with a very low crown, with mourning crepe sewed over the original band. His suit is too short and too tight for him. He is walking up and down, trying to control his grief, but suddenly he gives in, rests his face against his mother's old washtub, and cries." She brushed back her hair, closed her eyes for concentration, and continued, "He must have felt terror at that moment, knowing he was alone in a world he feared, and which despised him, and a little later I think he ran to the doors and windows and locked them all securely."

Mr. Nation inhaled, sat farther back in his chair, and said he considered the fantasy of the locking of the doors and windows a most interesting one. Perhaps it really had happened that way; perhaps it was the beginning of Emmanuel's preoccupation with locks and bolts and bars which was, some years later on, to baffle the police so greatly. He crushed his cigarette with a slow scrubbing motion and went on with his story.

It seemed that following his father's death, Emmanuel was not only alone but homeless, too, and at once a pathetic itinerant existence had begun for him, for he became a sort of housewife's helper who rarely spent more than a day or two in any one place: a kind of rustic menial who moved from villager to villager, from farmer to farmer, doing the domestic work required of him in return for his food, his temporary bed, and perhaps even a few coins on occasion.

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He cooked, he scrubbed, he mended, he baked for his employers—but washing was the thing he did best, and that was the task he was usually called on to do.

But Mr. Nation did not want his listeners to think of Emmanuel as being without ambition during those years. If they did think so, they would be misled, for actually the child had had a positive if somewhat modest goal that never wavered, and that was to come to America and eventually own a laundry of his own. His task was a difficult one, and to achieve his purpose he had led a life of hysterical penury and deprivation. Nevertheless, he had his passage money eventually, and a little besides, and when he was twenty years old he landed triumphantly in New York.

Being a laundryman, he had gone at once to work in a laundry. It was a small establishment, located somewhere on the Lower East Side, and for the next few years, according to the material the police gathered after his death, he had put in long hours at his washtub, or bending above his ironing board. He had lived entirely to himself—but if the timidity of his temperament had prevented his having friends, it had served equally well to preclude his making enemies. The only relaxation he had had was smoking, and Mr. Nation felt he must make this point sooner or later, since the buying of a pack of cigarettes had figured in his murder.

People who had known him in those years described him as a thin, hairy, shy, eccentric little man with a delicate constitution; and while Mr. Nation found it possible to believe almost anything he had heard about Emmanuel Vogel, he could not bring himself to credit the reports of his physical frailness, since all his life he had performed, as a matter of course, work which would have caused the average, healthy dray-horse to stagger and collapse in the streets.

John Littleton, the lawyer, said: "I know he got his own laundry sooner or later. The question is, how long did it take?"

"It took ten years," continued Mr. Nation. "By that time he'd saved a thousand dollars, and had already found a ground-floor location in Harlem, where he hoped to prosper."

In the rear of the living room, which was already becoming a little dusky, the Filipino houseboy was stuffing broiled mushroom caps with a mixture of crab and lobster meat. He listened with pride to the conversation, smiling and nodding wisely each time Mr. Nation made a point. It was his opinion that his employer was not aggressive enough, that too often he permitted his inferiors to dominate a conversation.

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The houseboy placed the mushrooms on circular pieces of thin toast and added to each a portion of a golden-brown spiced sauce which he had perfected himself. When he first had come to work for Mr. Nation, he sometimes would put down his tray, rub his hands together, and laugh boisterously at his employer's witty remarks, rolling his eyes and glancing seductively at the guests, as if urging them to appreciate and applaud, too; but Mr. Nation had told him finally that such partisanship, while heart-warming and most flattering, was not entirely in keeping with the stricter usages of good form, and he had had to give it up. Now he arranged the mushrooms on a silver platter and moved silently toward the guests, his teeth white and gleaming, and at that instant Mr. Nation was saying:

"It's necessary for me to describe the new place in detail, I'm afraid. Well, to begin with, there was a large front room that faced on the street. Behind it, there were two smaller connecting rooms that opened onto a tenement hallway. The one window in the main room looked out on a narrow courtyard at the side. —Have I made myself clear? Do you visualize the layout of Emmanuel's laundry?"

The guests said they did, and he went on: "After taking the place, Emmanuel's first move was to rent the two smaller rooms to an old colored woman who lived alone, and who was content to mind her own business. When the deal between them was made, the connecting door was locked and bolted from the laundry side, but not being satisfied with that Emmanuel had it nailed securely. He had iron bars put across the window that faced the court, bars so close together that not even a sparrow hawk could have got through them. Afterwards, he had two extra locks and a heavy chain put on the street door, and as a further precaution the workmen added a strong iron bolt—all, you understand, on the inside."

John Littleton selected a mushroom, bit into it, swallowed, and said, "He'd already invested his capital, so he couldn't have had much loose cash lying around at the time. What was he trying to protect? What did he really have to lose?"

Marcella Crosby sat forward excitedly in her chair. It was axiomatic, she said, that those who have the least must guard it the most faithfully. She pointed out that when we love and are loved in return, we leave our riches unguarded for all to accept or destroy, but when love is gone we see at last what has slipped through our fingers and struggle to keep what we no longer possess.

When we are young and full of life and have health in profusion, we consider those things our peculiar right and accept them without

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gratitude. While we have our treasure, we give no thought to it, as if our very indifference to the things we have in abundance were our assurance they would last forever, but when we are old and ailing, and life has become nagging, painful, and hardly worth keeping, we discover at length that it is too precious to be given up and make the most elaborate efforts to preserve it, to hold onto the unprofitable days we have left.

Marcella confessed that the fable of the barn door and the missing horse had always interested her, not because of its innate truth but because of its sly, ingenuous falsity. To be accurate, to accord with the perverse nature of man's mind, the moral should be reversed to warn us all that there's no use locking the barn door until we know for certain that the horse is actually gone.

Her voice grew self-conscious, hesitated, and died away.

Phil Cottman, who published her work, who advertised her as the greatest mystic poet since William Blake, and who was embarrassed by her imagery until it was safely between the covers of one of her volumes, looked down at the rug and said, "Perhaps Emmanuel had accumulated more money than the price of his laundry and the extra cash was hidden somewhere about the place. If that's true, then his precautions were sensible enough."

Outside, the park was now bathed in the soft full light of the sun, and Dr. Flugelmann, observing it in silence, her eyes half closed and a little sad, waved suddenly in the direction of the bird house and said, "Oh, no, no! It wasn't anything definite, anything real, he feared. The laundry with its locks and bolts and bars was only his little white bird house where he hoped to be safe. Oh, I know the type so well, and have had them in treatment many times. Always, they have a sense of their own doom: they fear they will be robbed, they fear they will be murdered, they fear beyond the next building there lurks some terror for them alone."

She turned to Walter Nation, asking him if Emmanuel had expressed his anxieties to others and if they were now part of the record of his death, but he said that he did not know. A moment later he went on with the details of Emmanuel's life in the new neighborhood.

During the months he had lived there, he had not once gone out of the small area from which he drew his living. He had had no assistants. He had continued to work long hours, longer than ever now that he was laboring for himself alone. He was never known to go to the theater or even to the movies. He did not read. He did

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not drink or gamble. He did not have a friend with whom he could talk, or to whom he could confide his ambitions or his fears. He had no sweetheart.

And so Emmanuel lived for a time, and then, after delivering a parcel of laundry to a customer one night, he stopped in the cigar store across the street from his place to buy a pack of cigarettes. It was ten o'clock at the time and the clerk, who knew him as well as anybody, asked if he were now going to bed. Emmanuel replied that he'd like to, but could not, as he had at least two hours more work to do that night. Then the clerk watched him cross the street, unfasten his system of locks, enter his laundry, and turn on the lights. Fifteen minutes later the clerk happened to look across the street again, and, seeing the lights in the laundry go out, he said to himself, Emmanuel didn't do his work, after all. He started to turn away, to go back behind his counter, but he had an odd sense of disaster at that moment, a feeling that something was wrong across the street, and he stood irresolute inside his shop, staring at Emmanuel's door.

At about the instant the clerk had seen the lights go out, Emmanuel's tenant, the old colored woman who lived in the adjoining rooms, heard three pistol shots from the interior of the laundry. The sound alarmed her and she went to the connecting door and called out, "Are you all right? Is everything all right in there?" But she got no answer, and she hurried through the door of the tenement house and onto the sidewalk, bumping into a policeman who was passing. What she told the policeman as she disengaged herself was not known, but the chances were she did not say that she had heard three shots. If she did tell him that, then his assumption that he was dealing with a routine suicide seemed, in Mr. Nation's opinion, almost incredible.

"She was excited at the time," said John Littleton. "Maybe she jumped at the conclusion, and simply told the cop that the laundryman had shot himself. Maybe the cop accepted her theory without question."

Mr. Nation considered this explanation logical. At any rate, neither the policeman nor the old woman had thought murder a possibility as they approached the laundry door. "All this had taken only a minute or so, but already a crowd had gathered, and when the policeman found the door locked and realized he couldn't get in without breaking it down, he thought of the transom. There was a small boy in the crowd, so the policeman lifted the boy onto his shoulders and told him to crawl through the transom and open the

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door from the inside. But the boy found out soon enough that Emmanuel had thought of the transom, too, and that it was nailed shut. Then the policeman handed the boy his club and told him to break the glass with it. The boy did so, and lowered himself into the room. Almost at once the group outside heard him fumbling at the locks and bolts. He solved them all at last and the door swung open upon the most beguiling mystery of our time."

The telephone rang just then and Mr. Nation lifted the receiver. When he replaced it, he went on to say that, in the long, precise wedge of brightness from the policeman's flashlight, Emmanuel Vogel was seen lying in the center of his room, rapidly bleeding to death. There was an expression of horror on his face, as if what he had feared in secret had come true at last, and, as the policeman and the crowd watched him, the arm that had rested against his thigh twitched, relaxed slowly, and slid forward to the floor. He moved his lips three times, as if trying to speak, then shuddered and slumped somehow from within. His eyes opened and fixed themselves on the ceiling in the patient, impersonal stare of death, and the obsessed purpose of his harried and insipid life was now fulfilled.

The first thing the policeman noticed was that there was no gun near the body. The next was that the victim had been shot three times—twice in the head, once through the right hand. When the significance of these facts became clear to him, he told one of the people outside to call police headquarters and report a homicide. Then he pushed back the crowd and bolted the door again. He found the light switch and snapped it on, moving forward with nervous caution. He was convinced at that time that the murderer was still in the room, but he searched it thoroughly and there was nobody there. When he couldn't discover the murderer, he determined at least to locate the weapon the murderer had used, but he couldn't find the gun, either.

By that time the ambulance and the police cars had arrived, and at once the medical examiner settled the question of how Emmanuel had died: he had been shot from a distance of several feet by a revolver held level with his head. It was murder, he said; it couldn't possibly be anything else. At once the room was filled with specialists testing, measuring, photographing, examining, and asking questions. They found the one window closed and latched from the inside, the iron bars all in place. The connecting door was still bolted and locked from the inside, still firmly nailed shut.

When the homicide experts saw all this, they looked at one another

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in astonishment and shook their heads. Then the policeman repeated his story and the detectives again questioned the group who had been at the door when it had swung open. They verified each detail of the policeman's story: the door had most certainly been locked on the inside, they said, and after the boy opened it absolutely nobody had come out of the room. There was no doubt in their minds on this point. They would swear to it anywhere, any time.

The homicide men had then gone back to work in earnest. If the murderer had not left the laundry, obviously he was still in it somewhere, and in the days that followed they almost dismantled the place as they searched, but without success, for trapdoors, sliding panels, or even holes in the walls and ceiling through which a pistol could have been fired. They followed every clue, exhausted every possibility, and learned nothing. To this day, the mystery of how Emmanuel Vogel was murdered, by whom, and for what reason, was as great as it had been on the original February night of his death.

"How about the boy?" asked Phil Cottman. "He might have picked up the pistol while he was alone in the room. Did anybody think of that?"

"Yes," said Mr. Nation. "Everybody thought of it, including the cop who was first on the scene. When he saw the gun was missing, even before he shut the door again, he searched the child, but there was no gun."

He said he'd like to clear up some of the other points that might be bothering his listeners. To begin with, there were no fingerprints, no strands of hair in the victim's fist, no torn letters to be pieced together, no broken buttons—no physical clues of any sort, in fact. The laundry had not been ransacked. Everything was found to be in order, in its proper place. The glass in the barred window was quite intact, the front door elaborately secured from the inside as everybody knew by this time. It wasn't likely the murderer could have refastened the bolts and chains after leaving the room, but even if he had been able to do so, he would not have had time. Then, too, he would have had to make himself invisible while doing it, for the cigar clerk had been watching the door from the time the lights went out until the crowd gathered. Afterwards, Emmanuel's life had been traced step by step, from the time he was born until the time he had died. He had been no famous person in disguise; he had been no secret agent of a foreign government. He had been precisely what he appeared to be—an illiterate, obscure, terrified, eccentric little laundryman, who lived alone and who had known almost nobody . . .

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To the west, along Madison Avenue, the cabs sped up and down in a steady, aggressive stream, their bodies flashing yellow, green, and orange in the brilliant late-afternoon light. Farther away, somewhere to the north, an ambulance clanged as it approached the East River and Dr. Flugelmann, listening tensely, as if the warning were a sound most familiar to her, pressed her plump ringed fingers together and said, "I do not know why, but I assumed that Emmanuel would be killed by a crushing blow, something brutal and entirely primitive. Being killed by a pistol was not at all right for him."

She explained that while Mr. Nation was telling his story, she, too, had been occupied. She had been weaving a fantasy of her own, she said—a fantasy which had concerned Emmanuel and his mother's washtub. As the others no doubt remembered, he had spent his formative years above it, and when he had left his native country at last, what was clearly the most precious thing he possessed? It was the washtub, of course, and she thought it the one thing from his past that he had brought with him to America. He could not have abandoned it if he had tried, for he was tied to the tub in a way that others are tied to the ones they most love. It had become his father and mother, his sister and brother; it had even become a sort of industrious wife to him, a wife who shared his labors and gave him security against the world he feared so much.

She went on to say that we all want security of one sort or another. It was normal and most natural to want security. But life itself was not at all secure. Life was strong and cruel, and its purpose was not peace, but conflict. If we are just secure enough, we are fortunate indeed, for then we can enjoy the wonderful things that life also has to give us; but if we become too secure, if we give up too much, then we have repudiated life itself. Who can say where the dividing line is? How can we know when we are entirely safe, or are merely not living at all?

She lowered her head with a smiling humility, as if asking pardon for being both trite and tiresome, and said gently: "And now, if you permit it, I will finish my small fantasy of the laundryman and his washtub. Now, let us recall that Emmanuel's mother had washed her life away over that tub, and Emmanuel himself, although he did not realize it perhaps, had really done the same. Then where had the essence of those lives gone? What had become of all that vitality, that energy, that strength and striving? I think the tub had absorbed it."

She turned in her chair, played with the beads about her throat,

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and went on with her story. She thought that after a while the assimilated lives of Emmanuel and his mother had had their effect on the ancient, wood-and-iron tub—so much so, in fact, that gradually the tub had achieved an awareness of both its own existence and the existence of its tormentors. It had begun to feel a little, too—to suffer pain in a sort of primitive, mindless way. Perhaps, during the last months of the laundryman's career, it would sometimes appear to shiver. Perhaps it would manage to slide forward on the bench, as if seeking to escape its oppressor, and Emmanuel, grasping it again with his reddened, soapy hands, would sigh patiently and pull it into place once more. Perhaps the tub even resisted him on occasion, and he would feel the tension, the sudden hostility between them.

And then, one night, life itself had originated mysteriously in the tub, just as it had, with an equal mysteriousness, once originated in Emmanuel and his mother, and at that moment the tub understood the bondage the three of them had shared in common. But what it could not know was that the Vogels, being human, and as such almost indestructible, could endure easily what the tub could not . . . All this happened on the February night when Emmanuel had bought his cigarettes and crossed the street. Then, as he prepared to do his extra work, the tub had gathered all its strength together, had risen up, struck him, and crushed his skull.

She held her glass forward toward the window, allowing the sunlight to touch it, to bring to life the shattered pinks and greens in the crystal; then, seeing that John Littleton was about to offer an objection to her theory, she smiled and said placatingly, "I know, I know. He wasn't killed by a blow from a washtub. He was shot by a pistol. It makes my story even sillier, doesn't it?"

"Emmanuel Vogel was killed by somebody as real as any person in this room," said John Littleton, "and I think I know how it was done. Now, the first thing is to determine the motive. All right, then: let's take the commonest motive of all—greed."

He went on to say that the frightened ask for the disaster that so often overtakes them. If Emmanuel had behaved like others, perhaps his neighbors would have thought nothing of him, but with all those bolts and locks they must have wondered what he had so precious that he must guard it so well. Then, since we can understand the minds of others only with the content of our own minds, and since the most precious thing to those who knew him was money, they all must have thought, at one time or another, that the little laundry-

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man was rich, that his wealth was hidden somewhere in his room. Having come to this conclusion, it was only natural that one of them should decide to take the money for himself.

"Now we have a logical motive," said Mr. Littleton. "The next thing is to get the criminal inside the room. That can be done easily between the time Emmanuel left the cigar store and the time the shots were heard. Nobody knows, of course, but I think somebody just knocked on the door, and when Emmanuel asked what he wanted he said he'd come to pick up a bundle of laundry."

To fear indiscriminately was even more naive, in Mr. Littleton's mind, than to trust without reason. He felt that Emmanuel had so long quieted his terrors with formulas he had established for his protection that he no longer had the power to distinguish between what was dangerous and what was not. The fact that the murderer had announced his intention in a phrase entirely familiar to him had reassured him and he had opened the door with no misgivings at all; then, as if to protect both himself and his murderer against a world outside which menaced them equally, he had at once re-locked and rebolted his door.

Perhaps the intruder had not planned to kill Emmanuel, had meant only to frighten him into giving up his money, but Emmanuel had gone to pieces when he saw the pistol and had hurled himself at the thief with that despairing, superhuman courage that only the truly timid achieve. No doubt the last thing the robber had anticipated was resistance of such heroic quality. Perhaps he had become frightened, too, and had backed away from the laundryman's hysterical grasp, firing straight at his head. Then he had hurried to the door, but before he could get the locks undone the crowd was there waiting for him.

"You got him inside the laundry," said Phil Cottman. "Now get him through that locked and watched door—if you can."

To Mr. Littleton's way of thinking, that was the most obvious part of the mystery—so simple, in fact, that perhaps the others would not consider it a solution at all; nevertheless, he was convinced it had happened precisely in the manner he had in mind. He said he could visualize the murderer standing in the dark, his mind working coldly, as he listened to the crowd outside. He knew he was trapped, that if he tried to hide in the room he would be caught. Suddenly he had seen the only way of escape for him, had known what every sleight-of-hand artist takes for granted: that the audience would be so surprised when it saw the laundryman bleeding to death on his

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floor, so diverted in that first shocking moment of revelation, that no eye could possibly take in anything else.

Realizing this, he had flattened himself against the wall, as close to the door as he dared, and at the instant the door swung inward he had thrust one foot through the opening and had planted it on the pavement outside, swaying his body backward as the crowd pressed their bodies forward to meet him. No one had seen him, no one had paid the least attention to him, and in a second he had ceased to be a murderer trapped in a room and had become instead one of the vanguard of those citizens who sought that murderer. A little later, when the policeman shut the door in the face of the crowd, no doubt he pushed the murderer out with the others.

Phil Cottman laughed. "That situation has its possibilities," he said. "I can see the murderer dusting off his coat where the cop had shoved him and saying, 'Give these cops a little authority and they think they own the town. Well, I'm a citizen and taxpayer and I'm not going to stay here any longer and be pushed around by cops!' Then the crowd opened up for him and he walked away with the murder weapon dangling at his belt."

Marcella Crosby started to speak, but changed her mind. Instead, she sighed and stared intently through the window, her chin cupped in one thin, intense palm. Beyond the park, the buildings cast their precise, wedge-shaped shadows on one another. Two birds came back to the bird house and rested on its upper ledge, ruffling their feathers, stretching their wings to the sunlight. Seeing these things, Marcella leaned forward and touched the dense foliage that framed the window, thinking of the things she had once had, but now had lost; of the things that might have been hers had she had the courage to take them.

In the park, the last bright rays of the sun lay everywhere as heavy as honey, and sitting quietly back in her chair she thought: Look at the trees! They take the light, they diffuse it, they drink it up, they change it to fit their shapes and scatter the patterns of themselves on the grass below. They lean forward to the light, to take the last of it that remains. They cannot live without light, and yet, being mindless, they do not know that light exists.

Suddenly she made a nervous, disavowing gesture and said that while neither of the solutions satisfied her entirely, she was in accord wtih Dr. Flugelmann's belief that the manner of Emmanuel's death had not been appropriate for him. She, too, felt that it should have been something crushing and overwhelming.

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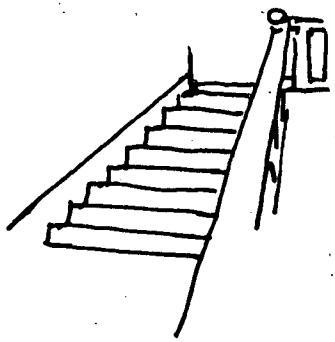
The others laughed at her earnestness, asking what her own explanation was. She said, "Emmanuel never had anything that makes life endurable. He had nothing! Nothing! He didn't even know that he'd been cheated of what was rightfully his—and that, to me, is the most dreadful thought of all."

"Perhaps you're right," said Phil Cottman, "but how do you account for the locked door, the non-existent weapon, the vanishing murderer?"

"My explanation is most simple," said Marcella. "I think God happened to be over Harlem on the night of the laundryman's death. I think He glanced down and saw Emmanuel working over his washtub, working fearfully and with no discernible purpose. I think God looked back in time and saw what Emmanuel's life had been, then He looked forward to see what the future held for him. When He saw that, he was so moved to compassion, seeing the future held nothing, that He bent down, took Emmanuel's skull between His thumb and forefinger, and crushed it."



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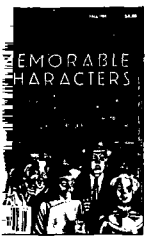

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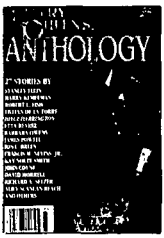

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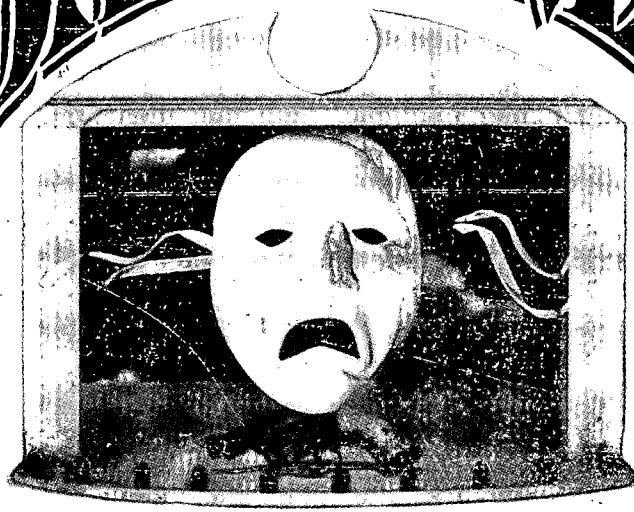

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